

Achieving Unity of Purpose Cascading and Nesting Concepts

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Unity of effort . . . requires coordination and cooperation among all forces—even though they may not be part of the same command structure—toward a commonly recognized objective. Collateral and main force operations might go on simultaneously, united by intent and purpose, if not command. The means to achieve unity of purpose is a nested concept whereby each succeeding echelon's concept is nested in the other. Unity of effort—coordination through cooperation and common interests—is an essential complement to unity of command. (Field Manual 100-5, Operations)

Every leader in the Army has learned that a mission statement contains the *who, what, where, when, and why*—the

five Ws. FM 101-5-1, *Operational Terms and Graphics*, defines the *why* of the mission statement as the purpose for the mission, and provides one example. Aside from the passage above, there is little in U.S. Army doctrine to help leaders articulate clear, meaningful purpose—the *why*—in the mission statement they assign to their subordinate units, or in many cases, determine for themselves during mission analysis as their unique contribution to the fight. The purpose of this article is to help leaders at all levels develop concepts of operation and articulate to their subordinates their purpose—their unique contribution—to ensure that unity of effort is achieved on the battlefield.

Why can't the *why* in the mission statement be simply

because you told them to do so? Perhaps you have given your subordinates the task to “destroy the enemy,” with the purpose as something akin to “deny the pass” and thought that was perfectly acceptable. Or you’ve said, “Seize the hill in order to destroy the enemy.” Are these not tasks and purposes within the spirit of mission orders? After all, the task you said you wanted to accomplish was to seize the hill, therefore the enemy could be destroyed; or destroy the enemy to deny the pass. So what do you want done: destroy the enemy or deny the pass; seize the hill or destroy the enemy—are these mutually exclusive?

Too often, in the middle of course-of-action development or wargaming, I have asked, or heard someone else ask, “Tell me again, what is it they (higher headquarters) want us to do?” Or worse, found myself in the middle of execution, or even during the after-action review, realizing that an enormous number of casualties were taken and resources were expended on a task that contributed little to the overall accomplishment of my mission, or that of the higher headquarters. Should mission analysis answer the question of true purpose?

Before exploring how to effectively articulate purpose, it is important to understand the concept of mission orders and why subordinates must have a clear understanding of their *purpose*, even more so than their *task*.

FM 101-5-1 defines a mission-type order as an order that “specifies what subordinate commanders are to do without prescribing how they must do it.” The manual goes on to say, “Mission-type orders enable the command to seize and maintain initiative and to set the terms of battle. [They] allow subordinate leaders to exercise independent judgment and exploit hanging situations.”

The concept of mission orders is not new. The 1982 version of FM 100-5, then titled *AirLand Battle*, was, in many ways, essentially a rebirth of the German offensive World War II concepts of which the centerpieces were *Auftragstaktik* (mission tactics; directives) and *Schwerpunkt* (focus of effort). Actually, the idea of *Auftragstaktik* can be traced to the Prussian experience during the Napoleonic Wars, whereby high-level leaders briefly told subordinates what was expected of them and then let them do it. The concept of *Schwerpunkt*, originally coined by Clausewitz, translated literally, means center of gravity. As John English points out, however, “a more militarily correct translation would be ‘thrust-point,’ to indicate the principal effort or concentration of force aimed at seeking out the weakest point of enemy resistance.” (From *On Infantry*, Praeger Publishers, 1984).

In today’s U.S. Army, we recognize the concept of *Schwerpunkt* as the relationship of the main and supporting efforts directed toward the decisive point. A supporting effort is assigned a purpose that either directly or indirectly supports the main effort and creates the conditions for the main effort to succeed. The main effort has the most important task and purpose at that time, and its success will contribute the most toward the accomplishment of the higher

commander’s overall mission or objective. The commander at each level should designate a main effort, along with supporting efforts. This focus helps him and his staff allocate resources accordingly, providing direction to the operation while setting priorities and determining risks, promoting unity of effort, and facilitating an understanding of the commander’s intent. As with *Schwerpunkt*, the idea is to be able to shift the main effort during execution as the situation requires. During planning, we articulate the interrelationship of main and supporting effort tasks and purposes in the concept of operations, which “describes how the commander sees the actions of each of his units fitting together to accomplish the mission” (FM 100-5-1).

The late General William E. DePuy—veteran of World War II and Vietnam and the principal author of the “Active Defense” doctrine in the 1970s—truly understood the art of writing concepts of operations that promoted unity of effort. He wrote that “the Army actually consists of *parallel, echeloned, vertically integrated and individually controlled* functional systems. For the purposes of execution they are echeloned vertically. For the purposes of synchronization, they are sliced horizontally at the level of each major tactical and operational echelon. Because maneuver is the key to which all functions relate, those horizontal slices are the familiar armies, corps, divisions, brigades, battalions, companies, and elements of the maneuver force.” What General

DePuy is stating is that directives flow downward (vertically) during execution, but synchronization is accomplished through an understanding of the horizontal interrelationships between units. “This means that a commander

should construct a mental model for the subordinates to act within the vertical and horizontal planes the higher commander has created within the concept of operation. This implies a shift in the focus of mission analysis from the discovery of specified, implied, and essential tasks to the discovery of the unit’s unique contribution to the higher commander’s concept.” (From *Selected Papers of General William E. DePuy*, Combat Studies Institute, Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, 1994.)

General DePuy called this mental model “nested concepts.” In “Concepts of Operation: The Heart of Command, The Tool of Doctrine” (*Army*, August 1988, page 31), he wrote:

When the top commander develops and disseminates his concept . . . , he obliges his subordinates to conform and execute. Each successive subordinate is expected to articulate and elaborate that concept in accordance with the particular conditions of the enemy, terrain and resources at his level; thus the higher concepts are progressively tuned to local reality. This is the genius of the system—a centralization of concept, a decentralization of execution and a full exploitation of forces and opportunities. Cascading concepts carry the top commander’s intentions to the lowest levels, and the nesting of those concepts traces the critical path of concentration and priorities. This is the phenomenon

the Germans call the *schwerpunkt*. . . . **The reason** [emphasis added] *the platoon is advancing upon the nose of hill 101 is because A Company must seize that prominence to protect* [emphasis added] *B Company, which will attack past it to the battalion objective, which in turn will enable* [emphasis added] *the brigade reserve to seize the key terrain on the objective of the division making the corps' main effort.*

General DePuy was addressing the importance of articulating to subordinates their purpose—their unique contribution to the fight. He was adamant about this for two reasons. First, it is the only feasible way a large, complex organization can prevail in a chaotic environment—where the planned tasks may or may not be executed. Second, it is the only way soldiers and leaders can exercise disciplined initiative (within the commander's intent), which is necessary when opportunities requiring immediate action present themselves, the planned concept is no longer feasible, or communication is lost. It is for these reasons that every soldier must absolutely understand his unit's purpose, and that purpose takes priority over task.

To further illustrate that purpose takes priority over task, consider that your unit has been assigned as a supporting effort with a task and a purpose. For instance, during mission analysis, you derived your restated mission as *Team A attacks to destroy enemy platoon (task—the What) on Hill 481 no later than (NLT) 0700 to prevent the enemy from massing direct fires against the main effort (purpose—the Why).* You

may have derived this from the higher headquarters' concept and from tasks to maneuver units in the operations order. The information you had during planning indicated the enemy that threatened the main effort was on Hill 481. You were task organized and resourced to accomplish that task of *destroy*. As the battle unfolds, let us say that the task of *destroy* proves to be meaningless in accomplishing the purpose. Perhaps the enemy is no longer on Hill 481; perhaps the enemy counterattacks from an unexpected direction in your zone; perhaps the enemy has only begun to move some of his forces to Hill 481 and you believe that waiting until 0715 would best accomplish the purpose; or perhaps you realize that you can best accomplish your purpose by executing a completely different task (such as *suppress* or *support by fire*) that is within the commander's intent. If all you are thinking about is accomplishing the task of destroying the enemy on Hill 481 by means of fire and maneuver, then you have not realized the essence of *purpose*—or of General DePuy's message. The "what, where, and when" of your mission may change based on the enemy, terrain, and other circumstances out of your control; only your purpose remains constant. *Meaningful purpose gives the mission statement durability and longevity.* A commander's ability to clearly understand and subsequently articulate purpose has a direct impact on unleashing initiative on the battlefield and tapping into the talent of your subordinates. Of course, it would be prudent to inform your higher headquarters, but in so doing,

can you still take advantage of the opportunity if you know it in your heart to be the right thing to do? Yes, there is risk; there is risk in all decisions we make in this business of war-fighting. The critical questions to ask yourself are, "Do you truly understand your relationship—your purpose, as it relates horizontally—with the other supporting efforts and the main effort?" "Is your proposed action within the commander's intent?"

With an understanding of mission orders and General DePuy's "cascading concepts," consider the following example of a mission statement and the concept of operations. Note the interrelationship of purposes:

Mission. *Task Force (TF) 1-12 [brigade main effort] blocks from ALLIGATOR RIDGE to ALPINE VALLEY NLT 210001 JUL 91 in order to prevent an enemy penetration from disrupting the division's preparation for the offense.*

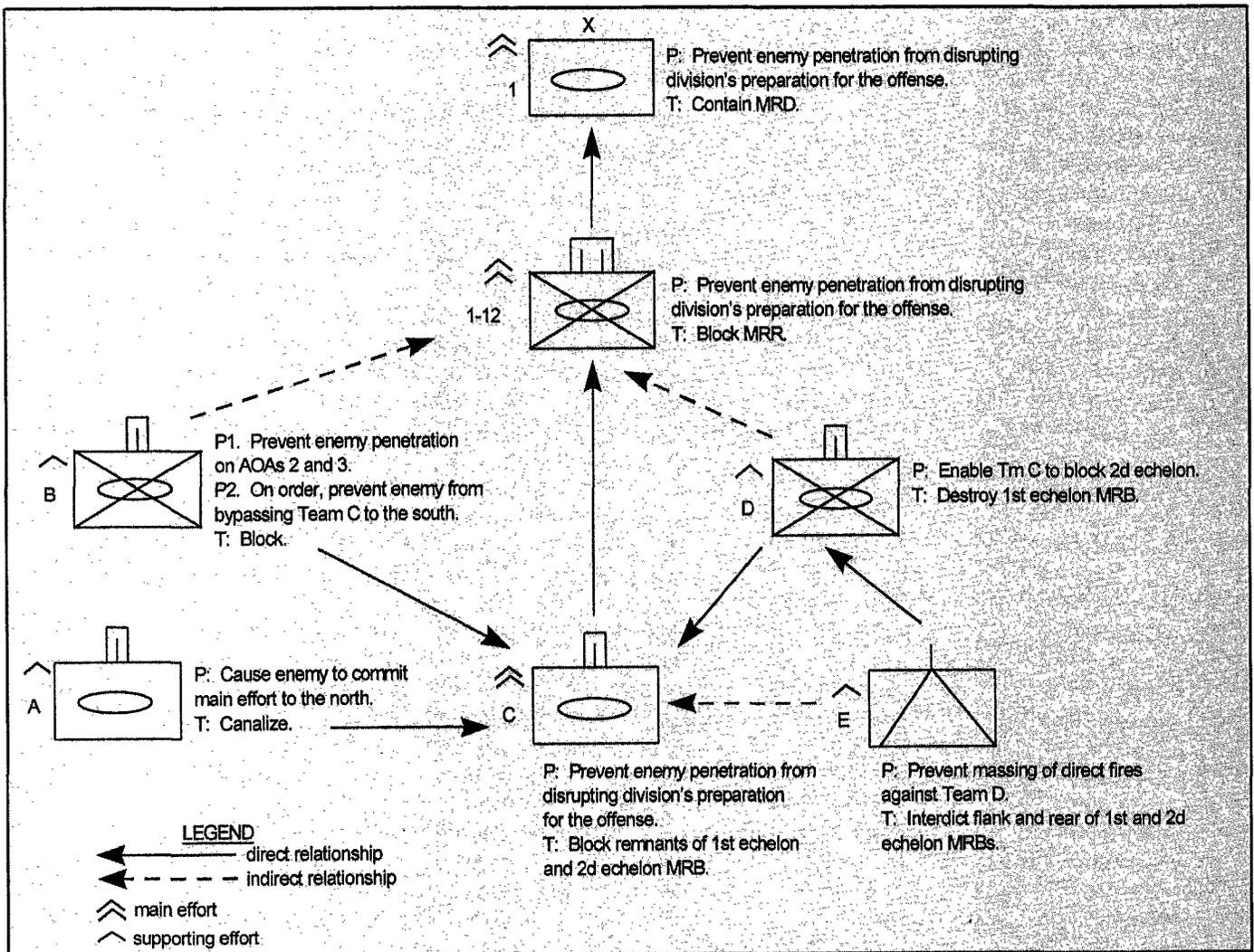
Concept of the Operation (Scheme of Maneuver). *TF 1-12 blocks NLT 210001 JUL 91 with Team D (supporting effort) vic. northeast of CRASH HILL, destroying the first echelon motorized rifle battalion (MRB) on Avenue of Approach (AOA) 1 in order to enable Team C (main effort) to block the enemy's second echelon MRB. Team B (supporting effort), vic. south of CRASH HILL, blocks in order to*

prevent an enemy penetration along AOA 2 and AOA 3; on order, displaces vic. south of ALLIGATOR RIDGE and blocks in order to prevent the enemy from bypassing Team C to the south. E Co. (supporting effort), vic. NORTH WALL interdicts the

flanks and rear of the first and second echelon MRBs on AOA 1 in order to prevent the massing of direct fires on Team D. Team A (supporting effort), vic. west of DEBMAN PASS, canalizes the first echelon MRB on AOA 3 in order to cause the enemy to commit his main effort in the north. Team C, vic. north of ALLIGATOR RIDGE, blocks remaining first echelon units and the second echelon MRB in order to prevent an enemy penetration of ALLIGATOR RIDGE and ALPINE VALLEY from disrupting the division's preparation for the offense. (From "The Green Team Guide to Teaching Tactical Decision Making," by Edward J. Brennan, U.S. Army Command and General Staff College.)

In this example, you should be able to identify the vertical and horizontal linkage, or "nesting." The purpose in the task force's mission statement clearly states why the operation is being conducted and how it relates to the higher headquarters' mission. In the concept of operations, we can see the scheme of interlocking subordinate purposes built around the main effort. The main effort company team's purpose directly relates to the task force's purpose (vertical nesting). Each supporting unit's purpose either directly or indirectly supports the purpose of the main effort (horizontal nesting). From this paragraph, each company team can clearly understand how it fits into the plan.

A technique that helps you understand how your unit fits into the higher headquarters' concept is a "nesting diagram." This should be done during step one (Analyze the Higher



Headquarters' Order) of mission analysis. The purpose of this step is to "establish horizontal and vertical nesting, not just for maneuver, but also for all combat support and combat service support [units]." Using the above example of a task force concept of operations, a company commander's nesting diagram would show the following, as depicted in the accompanying figure. This essence of this figure would become paragraph 1.b. (Friendly Forces). For brevity, I will illustrate only the maneuver forces:

Using the nesting diagram, you should be able to see clearly the indirect and direct relationships of units—both vertically and horizontally. This technique is especially helpful when the staff and commanders are tired from continuous operations. Further illustration with combat support and combat service support units greatly aids in the unit's situational awareness and understanding of each other's complementary roles and missions. The remaining ingredient subordinates must have to exercise disciplined initiative is an understanding of the commander's intent.

The commander's intent is, of course, a vital and inseparable component to setting the conditions for initiative. Unfortunately, there are those who believe that all of this task and purpose discussion is largely rhetorical and subordinates need only to understand the commander's intent two levels up if conditions are to be set for subordinate initiative. I

agree that an understanding of the commander's intent is crucial to success on a chaotic battlefield. After all, it is what General DePuy referred to as vertical nesting. By strictly adhering to the commander's intent, however, we miss the idea of horizontal nesting and what is also referred to as *collective intentionality*. This is the idea that each soldier belongs and contributes to something much larger than himself; he is only a cog in the wheel. The commander's intent addresses the single intention of the commander as it relates to the force as a whole. It does not address the relationship of the subordinate units to each other. Only a properly written concept of operations, with clearly articulated purposes, can enable the commanders to achieve the horizontal and vertical nesting—collective intentionality—which sets the conditions for initiative on the chaotic battlefield.

For instance, the commander's intent should elaborate on the purpose of the mission (if required), state key tasks to be performed by the force, and express the end state of the mission in relation to friendly forces, the enemy, and the terrain. It provides the link between the mission and the concept of operations. The key tasks are not specific to courses of action and are intended to demonstrate to the subordinates what is required for overall mission accomplishment—regardless of what happens after the first contact. An example of the theory of commander's intent is that the unit must accom-

plish a key task as stated in this intent. In the concept of operations, this task was assigned to a specific unit, but during the course of the battle, when that unit is no longer capable of accomplishing the task, another unit can quickly react. Relying solely upon the commander's intent as the basis for subordinate initiative causes two potential problems:

First, if subordinates do not understand what effect or result was intended (purpose of the key task), they may fail in accomplishing that task; second, if they do not understand their relationship to other units (horizontal nesting), then the unit is risking further collapse of the concept, not to mention fratricide and other problems associated with a lack of situational awareness. These are the reasons the commander's intent serves as a bridge between the mission statement and the concept of operations. It complements horizontal nesting of purpose, but it does not replace the need for a each unit to have a thorough understanding of the other units' missions.

Returning to the original questions posed early in this article: Why can't the "why" in the mission statement be because you told them to do so? Or, you have given your subordinates the task to "destroy the enemy," with the purpose as something akin to "deny the pass" and thought that was perfectly acceptable. Perhaps you've said, "seize the hill in order to destroy the enemy." Are these not tasks and purposes within the spirit of mission orders? The simple answer is that the purposes are ambiguous and meaningless. They are ambiguous because *seize* and *destroy* are both tactical tasks, so which one is mission essential—which one truly accomplishes the purpose of the mission? They are meaningless because they do not answer the "why" in the mission statement and do not demonstrate any linkage, either vertical or horizontal.

I have three basic rules of thumb for articulating meaningful purpose in mission orders:

- The purpose must be in plain English—no military jargon that can be misinterpreted.
- The purpose must be nested. The purpose of supporting efforts must directly or indirectly relate to the purpose of the main effort. The purpose of the main effort must relate to the purpose of the higher headquarters.

- I should not have to ask why I have that purpose. If I do, then it is probably a *task*. In other words, the *purpose* should stand on its own. If you tell a unit that it has the purpose of denying the pass or protecting a flank, then go the extra step and explain why they are doing it. Why leave it up to the commander to articulate the expanded purpose in his intent statement?

In conclusion, the purpose—the "Why"—in the mission statement, and the accompaniment of every task assigned in the concept of the operation, must be meaningful. The main effort's purpose must relate to the higher headquarters' purpose (be vertically nested). The purpose assigned to each supporting effort must relate either directly or indirectly to that of the main effort (be horizontally nested).

Only through a clear and thorough understanding of the interrelationship of purposes can large, complex organizations prosper in a chaotic environment, exploiting the talent of leaders, and setting the conditions for subordinate initiative. We must understand that the mission essential tasks that we derive during mission analysis (*seize, secure, destroy, etc.*) may change during execution. We determined these tasks with the best information we had at the time, but the situation changed in execution. Only a clear understanding of the purpose will usually prevail in the fight against a willing and able enemy.

Finally, an understanding of the commander's intent is vital to mission accomplishment, but only insofar as it relates to the purpose of the whole organization—it serves as the link between the mission statement and the concept. For soldiers and leaders to act boldly and decisively in a chaotic environment, they must also understand their unit's true purpose—their unit's unique contribution to the fight.

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