To: Company Commanders
From: Company Commanders

The Crush of Requirements from Higher Headquarters

Thanks to some amazing conversations in the CompanyCommand online forum and a subsequent survey built upon those conversations, we are gaining clarity on the top challenges currently facing company commanders. The number one challenge turns out to be managing the overwhelming onslaught of requirements imposed by higher headquarters.

In this article, commanders first report on the nature of the challenge and then share some practical tips for leading effectively in a high-task environment.

In a 2002 monograph titled "Stifled Innovation? Developing Tomorrow's Leaders Today," Army War College professor Leonard Wong reported that "the total number of training days required by all mandatory training directives literally exceeds the number of training days available to company commanders. … Company commanders are forced to choose which mandatory training is executed and which is not." One of Wong's overall insights was that "senior commanders increasingly are disrupting training with administrative requirements and taskings." The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan—and the relentless cycle of deployments they brought about—soon overtook the issues that Wong had raised.

The Army in 2012, however, looks increasingly like that of pre-2002. Once again, the Army is focused primarily on training and preparing for war, not on deploying to war. Once again, company commanders expect to (and are expected to) manage their units' training. And, perhaps not surprisingly, once again a major challenge for company-level commanders is dealing with the crush of requirements (training and administrative) mandated by higher headquarters.

Commanders Describe the Crush

These recent comments from company commanders convey their frustration with today's situation:

■ It is unbelievable how many changes and last minute taskings come down on a daily basis. There are times when training has been "protected," yet requirements from battalion and higher interfere because they are "urgent."

■ Last minute changes by higher are so out of control that no one believes a long-range training calendar or even that planning beyond 72 hours is worth the effort.

■ Everything is such a high priority that it makes it seem like nothing is really a priority. And I attribute this to the fact that field-grade officers can simply forward emails without doing any mission analysis.

■ There are too many AR 350-1 [*Army Regulation 350-1: Army Training and Leader Development*] PowerPoint requirements, which we will never be 100 percent on. We have to do a better job at prioritizing what's important.

■ We need to re-examine the mandatory, check-the-block online training that sucks thousands of hours away each year without a good return on investment. Perhaps we need to have some mandatory online training twice a year to correct this.

Commanders Lead Through the Crush
Liam Walsh

Recognize that you are going to have to prioritize everything and that not everything can get done. We tend to be the

"My time as company commander," says Liam Walsh, "has made me realize that I can't do everything well."

Stay organized, set priorities and learn to delegate, advises James Kadel.

type of people who want to do everything exceptionally well, but my time as company commander has made me realize that I can't do everything well. I could do a great job training my Soldiers, or take care of every Soldier's personal problems, or be on top of UCMJ [Uniform Code of Military Justice] chapters, or do a great job with awards and recognition, or have a great PT [physical training] average. It goes on and on. At the end of the day, we can't do it all exceptionally well, and that came as a shock to me. With the tempo of resetting from a deployment, training up for another one, and getting out the door, you simply cannot do everything well. Set realis-

tic training objectives and train to those standards, but be grounded in reality. I would contend that you will be a much more effective leader having some sense of balance in your life rather than going home at 2100 hours, eating dinner at 2200 and going to bed.

John Schmitt

When I first took command, I would answer the phone on the first ring, respond to emails right away, and get my "products" in right away. I became the guy who could be counted on to do those things. But with more experience, I realized that there was a never-ending supply of urgent calls and emails from higher—so much so that if I kept it up, I'd never invest any time in what were actually important—training, developing and taking care of my Soldiers. So I just stopped answering. I deleted emails that had been thoughtlessly forwarded with "HOT" and walked away from a ringing phone if I was on the way out to troop the line. That probably sounds childish, but it was intentional and thought out. That was the only way I could force those on the other end (staff mostly) to think farther ahead and not rely on the assumption that I would jump through hoops to make their urgent deadline. It caused some friction at first, but the volume of calls and emails decreased to only the ones that were actually HOT. When I had the inevitable confrontation with a staff officer all full of piss and vinegar who tracked me down on the flight line to find out why I had blown off the last "10 TPS report covers," I just shrugged my shoulders and said, "Well, sir, I was busy commanding."

James Kadel

What we are really talking about is time management. With all of these admin and paperwork issues, the question

"One thing to take into account," says Juan Carleton, "is what your boss thinks is important."

Dan Hodermarsky found that "assigning additional duties to platoon leaders energizes [them] to help with admin requirements."

boils down to: How can I, the commander, manage my time in order to focus on what I want to focus on? Here are three things that work for me:

■ *Stay organized.* This might sound easy, but it's more than just stacking paperwork and keeping your desk clean. To me, staying organized means finding a method to track everything that needs to be done.

■ *Set priorities.* Which targets do I spend time taking down first? Which tasks can I assume risk in either completing late or not at all? Provide guidance on your priorities to your subordinates, too. If your company XO [executive officer] has three tasks to accomplish but only has the time to accomplish one, does he/she know which one should take priority?

■ *Delegate.* As the commander, there are a certain number of tasks and actions that only I can do. It is important that I spend my time doing the things that only a commander can do. This means delegating all of the other stuff to my subordinates. You will be amazed at how much your unit can accomplish when everyone pulls together as a team.

Joe Byerly

I developed a commander's battle rhythm with all of our quarterly, monthly and weekly requirements listed. After I created that list, the admin monster didn't seem as overwhelming, but then came the unplanned "Soldier incidents." During my first command, I felt like I was drowning in the tidal wave of on-the-job training that comes in the wake of things like congressional letters, DUIs [driving under the influence], testing hot on a urinalysis, arrests, suicide ideation, etc. By my second command, I had a smart book with all the regulations, policies and action-step checklists,

which allowed me to be much more efficient and effective. I recommend building a book like that before you take command. A great place to start is the *Commander's and First Sergeant's Quick Reference Guide to Army Regulations*. Both the guide and my own battle rhythm are posted in the CC forum.

Juan Carleton

There are not enough hours in a day to complete every task no matter how you plan. So what is important? One thing to take into account is what your boss thinks is important. Get what the boss wants done first. My corps commander emphasized getting Soldiers home on time. Therefore, my division commander also made that one of his priorities. One Friday afternoon, after I had released my Soldiers, I was walking to my car and passed my fellow company commanders who still had their Soldiers working. It was before a deployment and there was always more to do. Out of nowhere I heard, "Captain, halt!" I turned and looked. It was the commanding general. I thought, "This can't be good." He asked me who I was and if I had anything to do with the formations of Soldiers he saw around. I told him I had sent my Soldiers home and that I was on my way home as well. He asked if I had a family, and I said, "Yes, sir. I do." He then looked at me and told me that I was the only commander who had any sense.

Jim Warner

Batching or stacking requirements is a great way of saving time. When you go to the motor pool for a few hours, you can do a 10 percent inventory, inspect motor stables, sign parts orders, conduct leader training, review the dead-

Excerpt from *Taking the Guidon: Exceptional Leadership at the Company Level*

OK, we know that there just isn't enough time to do it all. However, if you have figured out what the "big rocks" are for your outfit, you can be focused on what is important and not waste time worrying about what doesn't really matter in the long run. Stephen Covey, in his book *First Things First*, tells a story that explains what a big rock is. At a seminar, the instructor pulled out a jar and asked the students how many rocks he could fit in the jar. After filling up the jar with rocks, he asked if it was full. Of course, it appeared to be full until he poured a large cup of gravel into the jar. After then pouring another cup of fine sand into the jar, the students began to understand the point he was making:

Figure out the important things and put them
in your life first (first things first).

The alternative is to let the "small" but often urgent stuff fill up the jar, not allowing any of the big rocks to fit in at all. We have talked to several commanders who were frustrated following their time in command. They felt as if they were treading water during their commands and were never able to accomplish the things they intuitively knew were important. They had allowed the urgent but not really important things to dominate their calendars.

Of course, first you must actually know what the big rocks are. Once you know what they are, place them on the calendar, to include everything that must come first to make them quality events. The things that are not big rocks for the outfit will often still need to get done; however, you will purposefully not invest the same time and effort into them. The key to success here is communica-

tion with the company and, if necessary, with your boss. If your leaders are a part of developing what the big rocks are in the company and fully understand what is going on, they will no longer be frustrated when a "little rock" event isn't so hot. In fact, they will be motivated because they will have a new-found sense of satisfaction knowing that the things they think are important are being planned and executed to a high standard.

You can always see people's real priorities by the way they spend their resources—if you look at their calendars and checkbooks, you can identify their real priorities. The same is true for your unit. Look at your calendar and other resources to see if there is alignment between your vision and where your resources are going. If there is not alignment, it is time to make some changes.

Put your unit's "big rocks" into your jar (training schedule) first. Otherwise, all the sand will crowd out what's most important to your unit.

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line report, etc., but only if you planned for that and only if the right people were notified in the training meeting to have set those conditions. Have a small number of routines you ruthlessly follow. The most important routine is the meeting cycle. At the company level, you can get everything into a weekly training meeting. The company training meeting should end with everyone knowing all their requirements in detail for a week and in general for the next two. Concentrate on the company support elements—supply, arms room, etc. They are the most likely cause of last minute adjustments when people figure out they need support that was not previously coordinated.

Lisa Paradee

Before command, I was the person who wanted to do everything on her own, but I have quickly learned that that doesn't work in command. I have been blessed to have a wonderful staff that is always more than ready to help with anything they can and to offer up advice on how to make things work more efficiently. I am also fortunate to have

one of the previous commanders working here full time at the facility and can seek advice from him. I ask questions, and I use my team to accomplish things that can be done at a lower level. I've broken down the tasks that I must complete and I've delegated the rest.

Ari Martyn

When my company was being overwhelmed with UCMJ chapters, one of my FIST [fire support team] members, a college graduate E-4 who could type and write well, tore something in his shoulder and wasn't able to go to the field for the next three to four months. I made him my company paralegal, set him up with some office space, a computer, and an email account. Since we had limited FIST training that period he worked almost full time on chapter packets. The rest of the FIST became his assistants as he needed. He became the subject-matter expert, resulting in a nine-day cycle from me deciding to chapter someone for discipline issues to that Soldier being gone. The process became quick and painless for me, my 1SG and my subordinate leaders.

Dan Hodermarsky

Assigning additional duties to platoon leaders energizes the lieutenants to help with admin requirements, and it also trains them for future jobs—supply officer and arms-room officer are two examples. I briefed the lieutenants on the applicable regulations and on my expectations and standards, and then I used them as my points of contact for those areas of company business.

Michael Weisman

Maybe there are some guys out there who have really amazing people who can help break off the admin workload, but I would argue that that is rare. I found through all three of my commands that even with talented subordinates, there is no avoiding the paper crush. It is ridiculous how the admin requirements and Soldier issues take away so much time from actually training for war. As a platoon leader in 2004–2005, I did not have a government laptop and didn't really need one; now there's so much administrative paperwork that it's impossible for a platoon leader to be effective without one. I hope that doesn't come off as venting, but this particular issue is near and dear to my heart. You don't have a staff as a company commander, but every commander and staff above you will treat you as if you do.

Charles Bies

Probably not the right answer, but after a while you start to develop a "Spidey sense" of what's an important tasker and what is, in effect, a knee-jerker from higher up in the chain. Once I figured out what the knee-jerkers were, I sat on them, kicking the can down the road, even for one or two days. In that time, HHQ [higher headquarters] typically fixated on a new "shiny object" and the previously important tasking would disappear off the radar. You'll be able to tell which taskers you can do this with and survive. Generally, the genuinely important taskers that are worth your time are either directly related or only one or two connections away from a battle-focused event. Sometimes these tasks, though not trivial, are reactions to events elsewhere that are overprioritized. A few years ago, for example, two Soldiers drowned in their body armor, and the shiny object across the Army was to cancel all training and get hundreds of thousands of Soldiers into swimming pools wearing IOTVs [improvised outer tactical vest]. I'm not saying that water survival training is unimportant, but it's not so important that it necessitates canceling ranges and leaves. My company kicked the can on this tasker for three days, conducting previously planned training, and the next week HHQ didn't care anymore about water survival training.

Jim Warner

There is no greater privilege, no higher honor than command. The company begins to reflect your personality within weeks of taking command. It reflects you in more ways than you are even aware. You will shape how Soldiers, NCOs and junior officers perceive your unit and view the Army. When you leave command, you will forever miss those soldiers. Savor every minute you have. Manage the frustrations. You don't need to excel in everything. You need to decide where to excel and where to deliberately take risks. You may pay for the risks you take, but you will make that decision for your Soldiers. When you take care of them with good decisions, they will take care of you. Respect earned from Soldiers will be your greatest source of personal pride and achievement.

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The consistent top challenge company commanders are currently facing is managing the overwhelming onslaught of external requirements, to include last minute taskers from higher and having more mandatory training than can be done in the amount of time available. Dr. Wong identified the acute nature of the problem in 2002, and it appears a decade later that the problem is even bigger. Now we have even more requirements—consider the amount of time that commanders are investing these days in high-risk Soldiers. While we assume that our battalion and brigade commanders will step up to the plate to identify priorities and help shape organizations that put first things first, we company commanders have a responsibility to discern what tasks are most important, to communicate effectively with our bosses and our subordinates about them, and to be disciplined and collaborative in our approach, making the most of all assets available. We can't get it *all* done. We can and will seek to do the most important things.

When like-minded professionals come together in conversation to discuss their shared challenges and generate solutions, they and their organizations become more effective. If you are a currently commissioned officer who is passionate about leading combat-effective teams at the company level, we invite you to log in to http://CC.army.mil and join the conversation.

Connecting in conversation...
...becoming more effective.

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Art by Jody Harmon

Have you joined your forum?