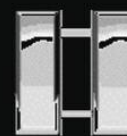


# CompanyCommand

## Building Combat-Ready Teams



**To:** Company Commanders  
**From:** Company Commanders

## Mission Command at the Company Level

In his *Mission Command* white paper published in April 2012, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff GEN Martin E. Dempsey envisions future combat and states, “Decentralization will occur beyond current comfort levels and habits of practice.” He is telling us that we *will* operate decentralized in future combat and that if we don’t prepare now to operate that way, we are not going to be ready. He places the responsibility squarely on our shoulders and states, “Resident in the central figure of the commander,

the ethos of Mission Command is a critical enabler of success.”

We asked company commanders in the CC forum if they agree with GEN Dempsey and, if so, what they are doing about it in their respective units. Members of the CC forum have engaged in an energetic conversation on this topic. Listen in as these leaders discuss what Mission Command means and how they train its principles at the company level.

### Mission Command in Our Past

“I do not propose to lay down for you a plan of campaign, but simply to lay down the work it is desirable to have done, and leave you free to execute it in your own way. Submit to me, however, as early as you can, your plan of operations.”

—General of the Army Ulysses S. Grant, April 4, 1864, in a letter to MG William Tecumseh Sherman before the 1864 campaign

#### Kevin Schrock

73rd Engineer Company, 1/25 SBCT

I agree with GEN Dempsey that to succeed against a decentralized threat we have to operate decentralized. It boils down to giving lower-echelon units authority and responsibility that has until now been held by higher levels of command. It’s a cultural change, but one that has already started. As a Stryker engineer company commander, I was forced out of necessity to give my PLs “commander’s intent” along with left and right limits and let them accomplish the mission. The brigade battlespace was too large to do otherwise. So how do you do that in training? Battalion commanders and company commanders are going to have to become comfortable with giving their lower echelons a mission set (mission, intent, battlespace and resources) and then letting them go forth and do great things. The mission can be something as simple as running a range to something as complex as a construction project. As commanders, we develop subordinate leaders to manage the time allowed to complete a mission, personnel and equipment availability to accomplish a mission, and the battlespace they operate in. We should trust our subordinates to execute, but should also have a reserve ready in case something goes wrong.

#### Anonymous

What GEN Dempsey suggests as a future challenge I view as a beautiful dream that can never be realized. There

will never be “decentralization” because brigade commanders and up simply *do not* execute intent-based leadership. Moreover, they won’t allow their subordinates to do so, either. So long as PowerPoint and the Internet exist, I will be required to submit a CONOP 48 hours out for every operation from cordon and search, to salsa night at the MWR tent, to road guard for PT hours. We are spending a lot of R&D dollars to ensure there is no such thing as an “immature” environment, ensuring connectivity from the moment we get off the plane or boat. I’m sorry, but didn’t we just have a gigantic discussion thread on the crush of admin requirements? [See the August 2012 CompanyCommand article, “The Crush of Requirements from Higher Headquarters.”] Now we are going to pretend that when we go to war our leadership is *less* likely to come down and manage our daily operations?

#### Jared Nichols

C Co., 1-12 CAV

Anyone remember that video clip a few years back highlighting a brigade commander in a TOC maneuvering a squad via UAV in an assault on a house? When I saw that video as a PL back in 2004–2005, I knew that the idea of the junior leader making independent decisions was at risk. Now we are almost avatars for senior leaders to get in the fight. That is food for thought. Maybe it will not be this way, but what I hear as talking points does not match the actions of current leaders on the ground.



*In Afghanistan, Liam Walsh (center) tries “to the greatest extent possible to let my platoon leaders come up with their own solutions and to shield them from the demands for information.”*

### **Jerry Steckmeiser**

**101st Signal Battalion**

We need to start pushing decision-making authority down to the lowest level and allow our junior leaders to make important decisions and even to fail on occasion. The trick is to give them enough room to make mistakes they can learn from, but not enough room to cause critical failure.

### **Liam Walsh**

**B Co., 2-1 INF and HHC, 2-1 INF**

Anyone who has conducted a combat operation within the last three years (brigade approval for squad operations?) or has had to sit in on a FORSCOM Soldier Risk Policy Tool brief will tell you that we are far more of a “detailed command” Army than a Mission Command one. What is most troubling is that it is a culture we have created ourselves. The risk aversion, micromanagement, and knee-jerk reactions that accompany “making the slide green” have created a vicious cycle in which junior leaders never get to experience the decentralization GEN Dempsey is talking about, which in turn makes them unable to operate independently, hence the need for micromanagement, and so on. It’s a cycle not likely to be broken easily. My company is currently spread over four platoon combat outposts. I try to the greatest extent possible to let my platoon

leaders come up with their own solutions and to shield them from the demands for information.

### **Jonathan Silk**

**C Co., 1-72 AR (CAB) and A Co., 1-353 INF (FSF-CA)**

Mission Command starts with trust, which is the foundation for any relationship. Your battalion commander has to trust that you and your company are competent enough to operate decentralized within intent and accomplish the end state.

### **Bill Ault**

**C Co., 1-103rd AR, C Co., 1-110th AR, D Co. and HHC 1-110th IN**

I agree 100 percent with the concept of Mission Command. In fact, centralized planning and decentralized execution have technically always been the way the military operates. We need to fully implement it and take our hands off the “commander’s override.” Allow our junior leaders to perform, and then assess and mentor them. There are two things I recommend:

Go back to the basics of commander’s intent and key tasks. Train your subordinate leaders and Soldiers (all of them) to understand intent-driven operations. Communication capabilities have created a crutch for Soldiers and junior leaders. Remove that crutch! Present your leaders with solid intent and give them realistic and challenging scenarios, not the cut-and-dried easy stuff. This will force them to think.

Conduct leader development sessions using vignettes. Conversation with your leaders about real-world vignettes is low-cost and effective development. For example, use a vignette that includes intent and imposes constraints that require the junior leader to seize the initiative and to act when there is no time to get further guidance from higher.

### **Tommy Ryan**

**HHC, 2-12 INF**

In my company, I leave execution to the subordinate leaders; however, we never leave a face-to-face meeting without each of us understanding the end game. I feel that talking through together what the final answer looks like and mak-



*Jonathan Silk (center) thinks that “Mission Command starts with trust, which is the foundation for any relationship.”*





For Erik Anthes (with map), "The execution of Mission Command is entirely unit dependent." One of the steps in his plan to train his company is to "treat all resupply/LOGPAC missions as tactical missions."

ing a verbal contract allows for my subordinate leaders to take ownership of the plan and "skin the cat" the way they see fit. And I am passionate about Step 8 ("supervise") of the troop-leading procedures. This is how I am able to keep true to our contract.

**Erik Anthes**  
E Co., 1-16 INF

The execution of Mission Command is entirely unit dependent. I've served in both types of units: the restrictive, "every task is a specified task" unit, as well as units that encourage disciplined initiative. I recently took over a forward support company in a combined-arms battalion. We have a lot of work to do with respect to Mission Command. My yet-to-be-fully-tested plan to train the company is:

1. Place a radio in the garrison command post. Monitor missions during the duty day (staff duty after 1700).
2. Treat all resupply/LOGPAC missions as tactical missions. Trip tickets, strip maps, risk assessments, every vehicle has a working radio (to include use of manpacks for fuelers), and a mission brief/AAR for each mission.
3. Conduct a company STX to test initial systems and establish a LOGSOP. Push the command track [vehicle] and HQ tents to the field to practice mission command for units in the STX lanes. This allows PLs, PSGs and those very important SSGs to get repetition in on decision making, radio communications, and leading their soldiers.
4. Ensure the battalion operations personnel understand logistics and their requirements. Nothing can screw up a great mission like constant changes in drop times, which affect Mission Command greatly by eroding the 1/3, 2/3 planning principle for your junior leaders. Impress upon the unit that a mission drop time needs to be locked NLT 72 hours prior to execution.

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**What Does ADP 6-0 Mission Command Say?**

According to ADP 6-0, these are some of the skills that we need to practice in order to be effective at Mission Command, broken down for the commander and subordinates:

■ The company commander needs to practice these skills: building cohesive teams, creating shared understanding, effectively communicating intent.

■ Subordinate leaders need to practice these skills: understanding mission orders/intent (implied: executing the commander's intent), seizing the initiative, taking risk.

We asked company commanders: How do we practice these particular skills? In other words, let's get specific about how we make this concrete and practical. And are there other crucial skills that are required to execute Mission Command as per ADP 6-0?

**Adam Hoffman**  
HHT, 1-1 CAV

I know this will sound simplistic, but I think many times the best way to allow subordinates to practice all three of their skills is to be absent. Maybe not literally absent, but if a subordinate asks for further guidance, why not refuse to provide it? Ask, "What do you think I am going to tell you?" Force subordinates to go back to your intent. (This also serves as a check on your ability to give clear intent.) I really think every time subordinates ask a question we would serve them best by first asking them what they think we are going to tell them. Then ask them what they think they should do. The current state of the Army (in my experience) is the "cell phone/no fail" mentality. So long as you (or your boss) can always be reached, what use is intent? Without intent, how can there be initiative?

**Scott Shaw**  
A Co., 2-14 INF

Mission Command is based largely on the commander's estimate of the capabilities and character of his or her subordinates. If the subordinate is more competent, then she gets more autonomy. If he is less competent, then he gets less autonomy. Want to get Mission Command into your unit? Then develop your skills to allow your commander to trust you more and with larger tasks, and develop your subordinates' skills so that you can do the same.



*"Regardless of the task," Joe Byerly (right) says, "mastery comes from experience, and experience grows out of mistakes just as much as successes."*

### **Jonathan Silk**

**C Co., 1-72 AR (CAB) and A Co., 1-353 INF (FSF-CA)**

One of the six principles of Mission Command is to build a cohesive team through mutual trust (ADP 6-0). This occurs through hard, realistic training. GEN Dempsey writes, "Training must replicate the distributed, chaotic and uncertain nature of the expected operational environment." Designing training to replicate the complex and dynamic conditions of combat environments (train as you will fight) will build a cohesive team, and it will also build trust between the commander and platoon leaders. The commander will trust that the platoons are competent enough to operate decentralized within intent. In the white paper, GEN Dempsey states, "Mission Command is fundamentally a learned behavior to be imprinted into the DNA of the profession of arms." In training, leaders can give and receive mission-type orders, train on giving a clear intent, and create scenarios in which subordinate leaders can exercise disciplined initiative and accept risk.

### **Joe Byerly**

**CTR, 3-7 CAV and HHC 1-64 AR (CAB)**

I agree that "taking risk" and "seizing the initiative" are two crucial skills. If we view honest mistakes made by subordinate leaders as expensive tuition and focus on getting every ounce of learning out of those mistakes, I think we will foster an environment that allows subordinate leaders to practice Mission Command skills. We can provide top cover for our subordinate leaders, which will help encourage them to grow and learn. Regardless of the task, mastery comes from experience, and experience grows out of mistakes just as much as successes.

### **Jason Wayne**

**A Co., 1-503 INF and HHC, 1-503 INF**

I think the best way to force your subordinates to practice taking risk and seizing initiative is by throwing them a curve

ball in training. If you've done a good job issuing mission orders, specifically providing clear commander's intent, then your subordinates have everything they need to transition from deliberate to hasty operations based on changing conditions on the battlefield. For instance, a platoon STX lane could have intelligence on it that requires you to exploit a time-sensitive target. This becomes a great opportunity for your subordinates to exercise judgment and decision making without you hovering over them. It also gives you a great opportunity to have a developmental conversation with them to communicate your expectations as a commander in situations like that. In other words, you can reinforce the culture of Mission Command in your organization and give your subordinates confidence in the types of decisions you expect them to make.

### **Josh Christy**

**F Co., 3/10 GSAB**

GEN Dempsey is right to shift our focus to Mission Command. Resistance to change, however, is a powerful force. Having senior leaders advocate something is only one part of the process. We must create alignment between what the leaders say and what the organization actually does. This includes the institutional part of the Army, where a highly centralized and controlling climate typically wins out over the daily application of Mission Command principles. This kind of misalignment sends a mixed message to our future leaders: "Mission Command is important, but not important enough

### **CompanyCommand Glossary**

**AAR-** after-action review  
**CC-** CompanyCommand  
**CONOP-** concept of operations  
**FORSCOM-** U.S. Army Forces Command  
**HQ-** headquarters  
**LOGPAC-** logistics package  
**LOGSOP-** logistics standing operating procedures  
**METL-** mission-essential task list  
**MWR-** morale, welfare and recreation  
**NLT-** no later than  
**OPORD-** operations order  
**PL-** platoon leader  
**PSG-** platoon sergeant  
**PT-** physical training  
**R&D-** research and development  
**SSG-** staff sergeants  
**STX-** situational training exercise  
**TOC-** tactical operations center  
**UAV-** unmanned aerial vehicle



(or too difficult) to implement here.” This leads to cynicism. COL Tom Guthrie, in the June 2012 issue of ARMY Magazine, suggests, “To prepare the sort of leaders we need, our institutions must possess similar attributes.” In other words, Mission Command DNA must be embedded in the organization as well as in the individual. If the Army wants adaptive, critical-thinking, Mission-Command-oriented leaders, it must provide junior leaders the opportunity to apply these skills, not just in theory or training scenarios, but integrated into the daily practices of the organization every day.

**James Bithorn**  
A Co., 1-506 INF

*Build cohesive teams through mutual trust.* Nothing is better than a live-fire exercise. Mutual trust is built when the support-by-fire position achieves effective suppression on the enemy, and then shifts and ceases fire when necessary while the assault element maneuvers. Getting to this point also requires well-executed STX lanes with detailed AARs illustrating the importance of mutual support and combined arms.

*Create shared understanding.* Don’t treat your subordinates like mushrooms (keeping them in the dark and feeding them); rather incorporate them into each step of the troop-leading procedures and value their input during training meetings. Create an environment in which subordinate NCOs and officers feel comfortable making relevant contributions to the long-term training plan. That being said, you have to give them the tools in the first place, which means a well-thought-out and prioritized METL crosswalk. This acts as clear commander’s intent as well.

*Provide clear commander’s intent.* Not detailed command, but left and right limits (key tasks and conditions at end state). Allow for critical and creative thinking.

*Exercise disciplined initiative.* The proper execution of the previous three lead to this being accomplished within an organization. Reward disciplined initiative publicly in both the training environment and combat (positive reinforcement). This is very easy to do if you lay out criteria with your battalion commander ahead of time for Army Achievement Medals and other appropriate awards.

*Use mission orders.* This is not necessarily a written OPOD, but rather implies, “Give the no-BS task and purpose.” Once a subordinate understands his lane, he or she will execute violently.

*Use prudent risk.* Is the juice worth the squeeze? Getting subordinates to understand this means teaching (clearly and often) the science of maneuver warfare. Oftentimes, inexperienced subordinates will assess inherent risk for a mission as higher than it actually is. Not understanding weapons and systems capabilities drives this. Think back to why we used to do the gas chamber: to build confidence in your equipment. The same philosophy applies here.

\* \* \*

GEN Dempsey writes, “The commander must understand what his subordinates can do and trust them—but not



James Bithorn uses graphic control measures to “create shared understanding” with his leaders. “Don’t treat your subordinates like mushrooms,” he advises. “Value their input during training meetings.”

blindly—to do it.” Company commanders are right where the rubber meets the road. Whether it is combat, training management or any other aspect of soldiering, making Mission Command work in the Army starts with us. One way to start implementing Mission Command principles in our units is to print a copy of this article and have a conversation about it with our Soldiers. In the process, we will build relationships and establish a level of trust, which is the foundation of Mission Command.

If you are a currently commissioned officer, we invite you to join the conversation in the CompanyCommand forum (<http://CC.army.mil>).



Connecting in conversation...

...becoming more effective.



CC.army.mil

Art by Jody Harmon

Have you joined your forum?