

PREPARING FOR AND PRACTICING MISSION COMMAND IN THE CONTEMPORARY MILITARY ENVIRONMENT

Cezar VASILESCU

Regional Department of Defense Resources Management Studies,
Brasov, Romania

Today's military environment requires many states to find ways to develop capabilities to fight a high-intensity conventional war, to protect and to fight with scattered forces under the conditions of an effective adversary threat to include air attacks and modern missile technology. Simultaneously, modern disruptive technology could deny command structures the ability to maintain constant communication with their forces on the ground. Such situations in which subordinates are unable to communicate easily with their superiors might create the risk of losing the fight initiative or the chance to seize opportunities while awaiting new orders. These factors emphasize the importance of creating military units that can fight autonomously, with limited guidance from higher levels of command, by properly exercising Mission Command (MC) principles. The main goal of this paper is to analyze the role of education as an enabler to an easier adoption of Mission Command philosophy, to formulate recommendations regarding the establishment of a proper organizational culture that favors MC and to highlight the complexity of implementing MC in practice.

Key words: *Command, Military education system, Leadership*

1. INTRODUCTION

Today's military environment requires many states to find ways to develop capabilities to fight a high-intensity conventional war (usually against a technically superior adversary), to protect and to fight with scattered forces

under the conditions of an effective adversary threat to include air attacks and modern missile technology. Simultaneously, modern disruptive technology (such as electronic warfare and cyber-attacks) could deny command structures the ability to maintain constant communication with their forces on the ground.

Such situations in which subordinates are unable to communicate easily with their superiors might create the risk (if the subordinate simply waits for new commands) of losing the fight initiative or the chance to seize opportunities while awaiting new orders.

Moreover, the nature of war is characterized by uncertainty (fog of war), unpredictability, dynamic change and constant confrontation of players' wills and characters. These factors emphasize once more the importance of creating military units that can fight autonomously, with limited guidance from higher levels of command, by properly exercising Mission Command (MC) principles.

The main goal of this paper is to analyze the role of education as an enabler to an easier adoption of Mission Command philosophy, to formulate recommendations regarding the establishment of a proper organizational culture that favors MC and to highlight the complexity of implementing MC in practice.

2. AN EDUCATIONAL PERSPECTIVE ON MISSION COMMAND

In order to prepare a large military system to be able to adopt and actively apply/implement

mission command, we need to prepare a comprehensive action plan, with education and training as a major component.

As General Dempsey mentioned in his influential white paper [1],

“Leaders must be taught how to receive and give mission orders, and how to clearly express intent. Students must be placed in situations of uncertainty where critical and creative thinking and effective rapid decision making are stressed. Training must replicate the chaotic and uncertain nature of military operations. Training must place leaders in situations where fleeting opportunities present themselves, and those that see and act appropriately to those opportunities are rewarded... Training must reinforce in commanders that they demonstrate trust by exercising restraint in their close supervision of subordinates.”

With a view to the aforementioned quote, the military education system must shift leader education and training from an approach that “focuses on teaching doctrinally approved solutions to one that equips leaders and subordinates - future commanders, staff officers and subordinates (Figure 1) with solid fundamental skills and builds expertise in critical thinking and problem solving” [2].



Fig. 1 Target audience for military education system.
Source: Author's own conception

Within the framework of Mission Command concept, the triad mentioned earlier is supposed to possess/exercise the following qualities and responsibilities:

<p>Commander (Idea)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Commands, establishes policy, plans, and programs; •Concentrates on collective training; •Is primarily involved with unit operations, training and related activities; •Pays particular attention to the unit capability and readiness; •Creates conditions (makes time and other resources available), so the staff officers can do their job.
<p>Staff officer (Implementation)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Conducts the daily business within established orders, directives and policies; •Focuses on individual training; •Is primarily involved with training and leading soldiers and teams; •Ensures each member is well trained, highly motivated, ready and functioning; •Follows orders of officers and NCOs in the support channel.
<p>Subordinates (Execution)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Disciplined, physically and mentally tough; •Trained and proficient in warrior tasks and drills; •Maintains arms, equipment and yourself; •Carries out assigned duties to standard to the best of his/her abilities.

Based on those required qualities, commanders, staff officers and subordinates are supposed to put them in practice, by adopting the MC philosophy as the driving force behind the operating concept (Manoeuvre warfare) (figure 2). In consequence, regardless of the situation, MC is meant to provide the overarching basis for leadership and command.

necessary to achieve the mission's end state. In the same way, it is unlikely that anyone will comprehend the commander's intentions without clarity. Better education is the way to provide leaders and subordinates with understanding and clarity of purpose. [4]

In the following paragraphs we will seek to identify potential

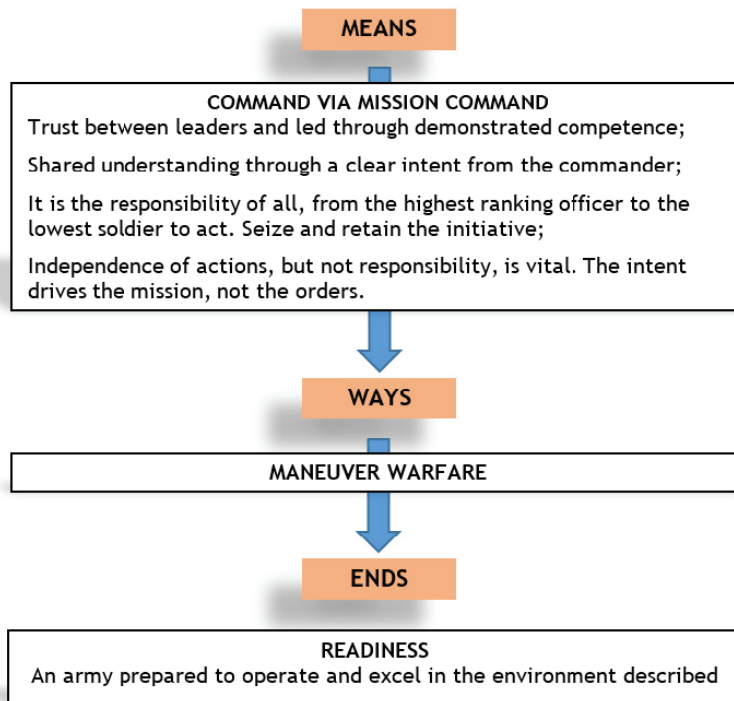


Fig. 2 Mission Command logic map.

Source: adapted after [3]

For mission command to work, understanding and clarity of purpose are the two key components. A commander is unlikely to be able to issue an order that solves the current issue without understanding what is

requirements for way education and training is conducted within the military education system, derived from mission command principles. Our research will focus on identifying:

- the characteristics that leaders and subordinates should possess in order to easily adhere and apply MC principles in their daily activity;
- the qualities/competencies that the graduates of military institutions should earn, maintain and reinforce throughout of their career;
- the teaching approaches compliant with the MC principles, which will favour the creation of an environment that encourages peer-to-peer and discovery learning;
- the disciplines (within the curricula) and examples of teaching points (within the syllabi) which may contribute to the creation of the required mental pattern needed for practicing Mission Command.

First we will enumerate the identified characteristics needed for leaders and subordinates to easily adhere to MC in practice.

1. Competence

- The training and education that takes place both in military educational institutions and in units provides commanders and subordinates with skills that allow them to achieve professional competence.
- Repetitive, realistic and challenging training creates common experiences that

develop teamwork, trust and mutual understanding.

- Young commanders should complement their institutional and organizational training and education through their own continuous self-development

2. Mutual trust

- Trust is based on leader's personal qualities such as professional competence, character and commitment.
- Exercising leadership through personal example, in accordance with the principles and values of the armed forces.
- Two way communication and the interaction between commander, subordinates and soldiers is essential.

3. Common understanding

- Begins with military education, which instills a common approach in conducting operations, a common professional language and a common understanding of the principles of mission command.
- Requires critical and creative thinking, exchange of ideas, opinions and recommendations based on expertise, experience and intuition without fear of repercussions.

- This includes sharing ideas that contradict the views of high-ranking people. Successful commanders listen to new ideas and counter-arguments.
4. Intention of the commander
 - Commanders write and communicate their intention in a clear and concise format (no longer than 3-4 sentences) that lower-level commanders can remember and understand.
 - The intention of each commander finds its roots in the intention of the commander two levels above.
 - Subordinates should use their judgment and initiative within the limits set by the commanders' intention.
 5. Mission orders
 - Mission orders are directives that emphasize to subordinates the results to be attained, not how they should achieve them.
 - The tasks of the subordinate units include all the standard elements (who, what, when, where and why) with a special emphasis on purpose (why).
 - Subordinates are accountable to their commanders for the use of delegated authority, but commanders remain solely responsible and accountable for actions over which subordinates exercise delegated authority.
 6. Disciplined initiative
 - Promote a climate of command that encourages initiative, and requires commanders which accept risk and the mistakes of subordinates made in good faith.
 - Subordinates are required (not only allowed) to exercise disciplined initiative in the absence of orders, or when current orders no longer fit the situation or when unforeseen opportunities or threats appear.
 - Subordinates should know that their decisions will be supported by their commanders.
 7. Acceptance of risks
 - The risk should be compared to the perceived benefit, the importance of an objective, the time available and the anticipated costs.
 - Waiting for the perfect information and timing can increase the risk or close a window of opportunity.
- Based on the requirements identified until now, there are several qualities/competencies that the graduates of military educational institutions should possess, maintain and reinforce throughout of their career (Table 1).

Table 1. Knowledge, skills and attitudes required for MC

Leaders	
Should be capable of	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Comprehending multifaceted and sometimes blurred problems; • Making effective decisions under uncertain conditions with a reduced amount of information.
Should possess	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Enhanced individual decision-making skills; • Critical and adaptive thinking; • Enhanced familiarity and cohesiveness; • Imagination and independence; • Strong character; • Virtues such as loyalty, honour, and courage; • Ability to summarize complicated situations in brief messages.
Should	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gain respect and trust by obeying the law, respecting the ethics of the military, applying the principles of military leadership and demonstrating technical and tactical expertise; • Lead through a combination of personal example, persuasion and coercion; • Direct leadership within the command decreases as the level of command increases; • Are legally and ethically responsible for the decisions they make or do not make, as well as for the actions, achievements and failures of their subordinates.
Are required to	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Take responsibility for decisions, show loyalty to subordinates, inspire and direct the forces and resources allocated to a proposed goal; • Establish a successful team climate, demonstrate moral and physical courage in the face of adversity; • Provide vision, professional competence, personality and will, character and ethical standards, courage and conviction in battle, trust and teamwork.

Source: Author's own conception

The teaching approaches themselves should respect the principles of mission command, by creating an environment that encourages peer-to-peer and discovery learning under the facilitation of a teacher, making sure that the students take ownership of learning and enabling participants to realize that they are part of a larger organization (Figure 3).

According to the proposed teaching approach, if students make mistakes while acting in good faith, they should undergo nothing more than corrective tutoring. In this respect, the principles of andragogy/pedagogy state that an individual usually learns more from a well-intentioned mistake, critically and constructively reviewed, than from being encouraged to “blindly” apply a prescribed and memorized process.

In relation with disciplines that should be included in Curriculum and Syllabus, it is our strong opinion

that teaching the contents of Mission Command as a separate learning subject (discipline) is not enough. A comprehensive approach is needed in order to create a mental pattern, enabling the graduates to easily adhere to and internalize it.

Such a change in mental way of thinking and also in further practice within a large Enterprise as the military system is a complex, but not unattainable challenge. To understand how and where the educational system may intervene we should analyze the organizational culture model proposed by Schein [5]. Three levels of culture were identified: artifacts (the mission, the organizational structure, and for military organizations, the doctrine), espoused beliefs and values (written/unwritten ideologies, ideals, and goals), and basic underlying assumptions.

Schein suggests that even the first level is the most visible aspect

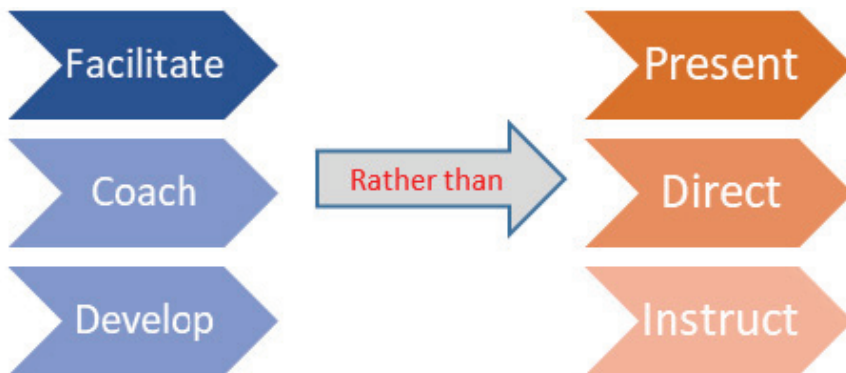


Fig. 3 Desired instructor’s teaching approaches
Source: Author's own conception

of the organizational culture (and the easiest one to be identified we may add), it has the least impact on how people think and act. He advocates that the next level has a much stronger and more direct impact on an organization's true beliefs and ways of thinking. This line of reasoning guides us to the conclusion that addressing beliefs and values through the educational process (to create ideals and goals) is the proper approach for a Mission Command ready mindset.

In Table 2, we are proposing a non-exhaustive list of disciplines and teaching points which content may contribute to the graduates' necessary mindset needed for practicing Mission Command. The list was developed based on the author's personal experience and the actual curricula of educational programs which are currently running in the institutions within the Romanian military educational system.

Table 2. Examples of disciplines and teaching points that contribute to MC

Disciplines	Teaching points
Decision making theory	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Decisions under certainty • Decisions at risk • Decisions under uncertainty • Building decision models • Structuring decision problems • Responsibility and risk assessment in defense establishment
Workforce management, Organizational theory, Performance management	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Human resource management: skills, roles and responsibilities • Managing the transformation of the military organization • Integrated human resource management: roles and responsibilities of military managers and leaders • Performance and motivation in human resource management • Culture and organizational climate • Group and team dynamics in the military organization • Motivation and performance management at group / team level

Disciplines	Teaching points
Workforce management, Organizational theory, Performance management	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Workforce recruitment and selection • Evaluation and personal / professional development of employees • Personnel compensation and loyalty systems • Disciplinary procedures and punitive measures • Rewards and sanctions as performance influencing factors • Strategic communication within the organization • Organizational culture - models and implications • The importance of professional and organizational development
Ethics and leadership	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Leadership styles - implications for the military organization • Change leadership within the military organization • Ethics and leadership: dimensions and variables specific to the military organization • Organizational tools for the promotion of ethical behavior and decision-making

Source: Author's own conception

3. AN ORGANIZATIONAL PERSPECTIVE ON MISSION COMMAND

In the following paragraphs we will seek to identify the enablers of mission command, translated in a series of recommendations for military organizations themselves.

Commanders should adopt a culture of debate encouraging subordinates' independent thinking and allowing them to challenge superiors when appropriate. Individual initiative (employed with good intentions and for good purposes) should to be considered superior to the traditional military

discipline and not viewed as insubordination. The goal should be to obtain a critical mass of subordinate leaders which possess the ability to act independently, have the confidence to choose and to execute the proper course of action even if it involves risks, as long it follows the general framework of commander's intent [6].

In terms of organizational culture, higher-level commanders should be comfortable with giving away control and authority to junior leaders and setting conditions for effective decentralized operations consistent with the doctrine of

mission command, while the majority of junior leaders must possess a predisposition towards action and accept necessary risks associated with leading and fighting in complex and uncertain environments against determined and adaptive enemies. Within the military Enterprise, the preferred organizational culture is the one that rewards leaders and soldiers who act and penalizes those who don't.

From an organizational point of view, the military system should be designed to reinforce values (such as trust, professionalism, and initiative) supported by fair, transparent and effective processes of selection, education and training, promotions and rewards. In practice, the disproportionate amount of time spent on administrative types of work compared to other might create improper incentives for leadership and career advancement. There is a high possibility that the idea of being a successful officer to be equated with administrative rather than tactical skills and therefore promotions to be consequently determined by how well paperwork is completed by an individual rather than his capacity for leadership and combat.

The military system is one of the most conservative ones in terms of imposing strict hierarchical relations and applying Standard operation procedures (SOP), and for a good reason - projecting stability, resilience and strength [7]. For this reason it is our belief that in order to achieve the aforementioned enablers

and implement the recommendations in practice it is not enough to simply teach Mission Command principles, or to simply present the lessons learned derived from the implementation of the concept in certain countries. What may work in a certain country may simply not function in another. It is possible or appropriate to apply the same approach twice and obtain similar (comparable) results only under exactly the same conditions, but we must assume that the circumstances will vary and change.

One potential approach for the MC philosophy to be internalized by the military organism is to emphasis its national character, based on the fact that there are specific national differences that affect certain aspects of the organizational culture (such as culture of participation and empowerment). Certain ways are demonstrating the existence of a natural link between mission command and the national particular culture of command or recalling the memory of great national commanders who had successfully utilized it intuitively.

4. THE COMPLEXITY OF IMPLEMENTING MISSION COMMAND IN PRACTICE

Due to its successful historical implementations and obvious advantages, mission command is widely adopted as a military doctrine by several countries. However, in practice MC is not always easy to be

achieved, because the key enablers of mission leadership (building trust, promoting initiative and autonomy, learning from successes and failures, and practicing mission-oriented leadership in all aspects of the profession) are impacted by a variety of factors such as: large number of personal, cultural, technological, and organizational restrictions of the military enterprise.

To achieve the intended results it is important to cultivate a culture in which the philosophy of mission command permeates all aspects of military life. Military culture is known for a rigid conformity to norms and subordination of members. Based on real life systematic observations, we can state that not all commanders appreciate initiatives, even if they have the potential to produce positive results. They might feel deeply uncomfortable in the face of uncertainty and seek to exert a high degree of control over even minor details of an activity. Some of them may feel undermined by individual initiatives and see them as a threat to their authority.

The core of mission command are human relations. There is a certain tension induced by the practice of mission command in connection with the hierarchy of the organization, between superiors and subordinates. Emphasis on subordinates' decision-making capacity and initiative, favoring autonomy and flexibility is in apparent opposition with the "order based" command practiced by superiors (an alternate name

given to detailed command, which usually implies micro-management approaches).

However, mission command and detailed command should be viewed as complementary and there should not be in principle any contradiction between them. There are situations (or types of activities) when one approach is considered to be more appropriate than the other. To exemplify such situations/activities when detailed command/mission command is required, we can mention: Peacetime vs wartime or administrative tasks vs combat training.

In peacetime, much of the officers' day-to-day work consists of administrative tasks. Since much of the administrative work is loosely regulated by law and usually the decision is centralized, this tends to create a mismatch between how officers can manage the day-to-day work and how they are supposed to handle it during actual combat. Even so, mission command still needs to be encouraged and exercised in peacetime activities to be operational in wartime.

Mission command philosophy can sometimes being perverted and used by leaders to hide their lack of expertise or as an excuse to avoid responsibility for failure [8]. Such a perception can be commonly encountered among junior leaders or subordinates. Also, higher commanders are less likely to tolerate failure (despite their claims to the contrary) as they might place more value on projecting a positive

external image of the operations carried out under their direction.

In terms of the length of a command (the amount of time spent in the same leadership position), this is also a potentially significant obstacle to the exercise of mission command. In military systems that apply rotation after three years for different command positions, this time interval:

- Is often considered too short to fully master the position requirements and build mutual trust with subordinates by developing enough personal relationship;
- Might encourage a tendency to go for tried and tested solutions stipulated in regulations, which may not be ideal, but at least are not wrong.

In principle, from the commander's point of view, all initiatives should be encouraged, even those that seem to be not optimal, in order to promote self-confidence and empowerment of subordinates. An immediate result of this transfer of authority is the enhancement of the subordinate's freedom to act and the additional time given to the leader to think strategically, not focusing on micromanaging the activities [9].

With the current development and adoption of new technologies in the field of information and communication systems (e.g. advanced command systems), if it's improperly exploited may create the premises for micromanagement. In theory, these technologies can foster

mission command if utilized as a mean of facilitating communication of the commander's intentions and ensuring the shared understanding by the subordinate leaders of the operational situation. In practice, because technology make easier for commanders to closely monitor developments on the ground and see detailed movement of their troops, this may create the temptation for direct interference with the work of subordinates or step by step management using modern sophisticated communication devices.

5. CONCLUSIONS

Mission Command existence could be briefly checked through the assessment of several indicators:

- Understanding of the local mission and adherence to higher intent;
- Mutual trust based on professional competence;
- Excellent communication based on shared understanding of doctrine;
- High value on learning in training and education;
- Tolerance for well-intended mistakes;
- A predilection for action and initiatives;
- Responsibility linked to authority;
- Belief in the ability of individuals to make sound judgment calls.

On a much greater scale, the efforts to institute Mission Command could

be a trigger for a larger organizational transformation, materialized in doctrinal development, improved officer training and education and finally an improved battlefield performance.

Referring again Schein's organizational culture model, the military body's artifacts must accurately reflect the kind of culture it is attempting to adopt. It is not enough to write new policy documents [10], changes must be made at the level of officers (and NCOs) military education and training programs, which contribute to the formation the beliefs and values of leaders and subordinates.

If we fail to change through education the foundation of basic assumptions and organizational culture in the military, Mission Command will remain just a trendy leadership philosophy, rather than a concept applied in practice.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This article is based on author's reflections after his participation as a keynote speaker in the Workshop "Challenges associated with the implementation of Mission Command in the Georgia Defense Forces", supported by PfP Consortium in Tbilisi, Georgia (July 2022).

REFERENCES

- [1] Martin, E. Depmsey. *Mission command white paper*, April 2012, <https://www.jcs.mil/Portals/36/Documents/Publications/missioncommandwhitepaper2012.pdf>. Accessed 25 Jan. 2023
- [2] Vandergriff, Don. The Basics: *Developing Leaders for Mission Command*, <https://thestrategybridge.org/the-bridge/2014/5/20/the-basics-developing-leaders-for-mission-command>, May 2014, accessed 9 Nov. 2022
- [3] Matzenbacher, Brett. The U.S. Army and Mission Command Philosophy versus Practice, *Military Review*, March-April 2018, p. 65.
- [4] Nicholas, Murray. The Role of Professional Military Education in Mission Command, *Joint Force Quarterly* no. 72, p. 11, NDU Press, 2014
- [5]. Schein, H. Edgar, *Organizational Culture and Leadership*, San Francisco: John Wiley & Sons, 2010, pp. 66-69, iBooks.
- [6] *Army Doctrine Publication 6-0: Mission Command*, U.S. Army, Washington, D.C., 2012, p. 1-13, https://armypubs.army.mil/epubs/DR_pubs/DR_a/ARN18314-ADP_6-0-000-WEB-3.pdf, accessed 26 January 2023
- [7] Andreski, Stanislav. Conservatism and Radicalism of the Military, *European Journal of Sociology*, vol. 2, no. 1, 1961, pp. 53-61. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23998331>, accessed 9 Nov. 2022.
- [8] Nilsson, Niklas. Practicing mission command for future battlefield challenges: the case of the Swedish army, *Defence Studies*, 20:4, pp. 436-452, 2020
- [9] Shamir, Eitan. *Transforming Command: The Pursuit of Mission Command in the U.S., British and Israeli Armies*, Stanford University Press, 2011, p. 39.
- [10] Johnston, Paul, Doctrine is not Enough: The Effect of Doctrine on the Behavior of Armies, *Parameters* 30, no. 3, 2000, pp. 30-39.