



U.S. Army Command Sgt. Maj. Timothy Hileman, Pennsylvania National Guard, speaks with Soldiers of 1st Battalion, 111th Infantry Regiment, 56th Stryker Brigade Combat Team, 28th Infantry Division, Pennsylvania National Guard during their training rotation at the National Training Center, Fort Irwin, California, Aug. 13, 2018. (U.S. Army National Guard photo by Sgt. 1st Class HollyAnn Nicom)

# A Stewardship of the Profession

## Using Mission Command as a Mechanism for Subordinate Leadership Development

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Using the philosophy of mission command, Army leaders can effectively transfer knowledge, promote growth through experience, and facilitate subordinate leader development. Points of failure in today's Army are leaders' inability to share the often-substantial repository of knowledge accumulated during years of service with their subordinates. As an organization, we have to ask ourselves why the Army believes that this exchange is so critical? This transfer of information

between leader and subordinate facilitates a stewardship of the profession; one of the "essential characteristics of the Army profession."<sup>1</sup> Stewardship requires commitment from a leader, responsibility, and personal accountability to ensure the development of future generations.

Unfortunately, leaders consistently utilize inconsequential and lengthy verbal exchanges with their subordinates as key opportunities for development. The inherent problem with this approach is that it assumes

you have both the undivided attention and complete understanding of the subordinate. Qualitative or quantitative growth is not likely to occur if a Soldier is not fully engaged during a conversation, or does not fully comprehend the issue. Leaders must ensure they allow their Soldiers the opportunity to experience and discover some knowledge on their own. Experts estimate that while activities like reading, watching, or being told a piece of information allows less than 20 percent retention, active experience can produce greater than 75 percent retention.<sup>2</sup>

## Development through Experiential Learning

The concept of learning through experience is not a new one. Aristotle wrote, “For the things we have to learn before we can do them, we learn by doing them.”<sup>3</sup> Applying this logic to the Army means that because subordinates may not know how to accomplish tasks they will one day be expected to master, leaders must provide their Soldiers opportunities to perform them before that time comes. Individuals can apply this idea not only to training exercises, but also to the most menial tasks.

David Kolb’s *Experiential Learning Model* states that learners must have opportunities to experience and make discoveries themselves, rather than through second-hand information.<sup>4</sup> Using the *Experiential Learning Model*, Kolb explains phenomena such as why we must physically ride a bike before we can learn how to do it. He suggests learners must first have a “concrete experience:” a child attempts to ride a bike. Next is the chance for “reflective observation of the new experience:” the child contemplates why he or she may have succeeded or failed to ride the bike. In the third stage, referred to as “abstract conceptualization,” the child considers how to improve the act of riding the bike. Finally, the learner applies the previous three stages into “active experimentation:” the child naturally develops the ability to ride the bike based on accumulated experience, reflection, and application of derived knowledge.

Using this model, Kolb includes the four conditions conducive to a learner, or in this case a subordinate, who receives the most benefit from a specific experience. First, the individual must be willing to be fully engaged in the experience. Then, he or she enters into a period of reflection on the experience. Next, the learner uses analytical and critical thinking skills to conceptualize the experience. Finally, the person acquires the decision-making and problem-solving skills achieved through the experience. Not all the responsibility falls on the learner in this model. Based on the criteria, there must be a leader or teacher, who motivates, facilitates reflection and observation, and assists in refining the critical-thinking and problem-solving skills necessary to make the proper adjustments and grow through the experience.

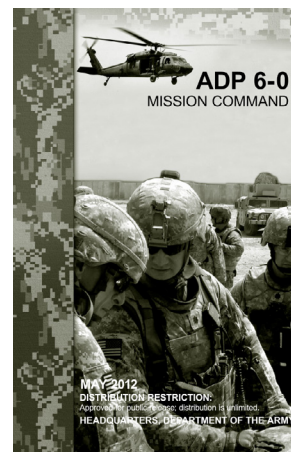
How can leaders create opportunities for practical application using Kolb’s *Experiential Learning Model*? How can they intellectually engage their Soldiers and stimulate the retention of shared experiences? The Army’s philosophy of mission command best facilitates this process. Leaders in both the officer and noncommissioned officer corps should employ mission command to share the amassed knowledge and experience applicable to subordinate leader development.

## The Mission Command Philosophy

[Army Doctrine Publication 6-0, Mission Command](#), defines the philosophy as the “exercise of authority and direction by the Commander using mission orders to enable disciplined initiative within the Commander’s intent to empower agile and adaptive leaders in the conduct of Unified Land Operations.”<sup>5</sup> Additionally, ADP 6-0 expounds that commanders should direct, lead, assess,

develop teams, and inform and influence audiences. While mission command is perceived to be one of the primary mechanisms that officers use to drive the operations process in support of unified land operations, besides the use of the term “commander,” the Army does not explicitly stipulate who may employ this philosophy.

Mission command doctrine is not exclusively for officers, NCOs can



also benefit from its use. While this may seem apparent, many NCOs either do not employ all phases contained in its framework or do not use it at all to teach and lead. The NCO Corps, which relies heavily on the direct level leadership approach, has opportunities to exercise mission command and use the shared experience between leader and subordinate to drive stewardship and leader development.

Within ADP 6-0, there are six fundamental tenants of mission command requiring synchronization of effort: Build cohesive teams through mutual trust, create shared understanding, provide a clear commander’s intent, exercise disciplined initiative, use mission orders, and accept prudent risk.

According to Command Sgt. Maj. Paul G. Hutchings, command sergeant major of 2nd Battalion, 160th Special Operations Aviation Regiment (Airborne), and author of “[The Philosophy of Mission Command and the NCO Corps](#),” “by employing these principles, everyday tasks can be used to teach and develop the philosophy of mission command.”<sup>6</sup>



Hutchings contends it is essential for NCOs to realize the potential of mission command for everyday life in the Army. An unfortunate reality is the substantial population of leaders who do not understand why this doctrine is effective. Below are the six phases of the mission command philosophy and why each one is critical in subordinate development.

### **Build Cohesive Teams**

The most effective teams in the Army have foundations rooted in the bedrock of our profession. A leader does not just accidentally create a level of mutual trust adhesive enough to cement a truly cohesive team. Rather, it is an intentional and deliberate effort by the leader to share experiences on a consistent and pertinent basis with his or her subordinates. Without trust, a team is nothing more than a collection of individuals artificially bound by assignment or position.

### **Create Shared Understanding**

Shared understanding exists when the entire team not only understands, but is committed to all aspects of a collective organizational goal. During this portion of mission command, NCOs should establish the operation's purpose, direction, and motivation while encouraging collaboration within the team. When all individuals understand the specific demands and implied requirements of completing a goal, they create a united wave of effort and reinforce existing mutual trust.

### **Provide a Clear Commander's Intent**

The commander's intent is a "concise expression of the purpose of the operation and the desired end state."<sup>7</sup> Providing intent is simultaneous with creating shared understanding. The purpose should be expanded beyond the immediacy of "why" and establish relevancy within a broad and strategic context. The boundaries established in the commander's intent relate directly to the extent Soldiers may navigate during the next step in the mission command process.

### **Exercise Disciplined Initiative**

Many otherwise capable and competent NCOs ultimately fail the section of the [NCO Creed](#) which states, "I will exercise initiative by taking appropriate action in the absence of orders."<sup>8</sup> If you build a team that has mutual trust and understands both the purpose of the operation and the extent of freedom of movement, your subordinates will have the confidence to take action without the need for close supervision.

As a leader, this is where you can carefully manufacture an opportunity to share the knowledge or experiences you want to pass down. Create situations where you require your subordinates to solve a problem or complete a task directly related to a leader development

category. Next, allow your Soldiers to experience both the success and failure resulting from their disciplined initiative. Many of the most memorable and relevant lessons learned in life do not come from success, but rather from failure. Leaders in the private sector are acutely aware of the power of failure and may encourage a culture where subordinates are not afraid to fail.

Google, for example, understands that failure provides considerable insight into how to learn and then succeed. Casey Carey, Director of Google Analytics Marketing, established a "quarterly failure report" designed specifically to achieve two results.<sup>9</sup> The first, is to expose potential fallacies in ways of thinking or adaptations of a tested product.

According to Carey, "Failure is a fact of life for testers, and every flop represents a fact uncovered. Sharing those defeats in a routine way promotes institutional memory, ensuring history will be less likely to repeat itself"

The second goal is to "reinforce the culture of failing – and learning – fast." Through the exercise of disciplined initiative, leaders can create an environment for their subordinates that fully supports failure as a means of learning.

### **Use Mission Orders**

The use of mission orders allows leaders to clarify the desired end-state, instead of just outlining the steps to get there. Leaders should not micromanage subordinates once they are delegated authority. According to [Army Doctrine Reference Publication 6-0, Mission Command](#), leaders "intervene during execution only to direct changes as necessary to the concept of operations."<sup>10</sup> Leaders must only interfere if their subordinates fail or variables change within the operation that require mission order revision.

### **Accept Prudent Risk**

This is the phase of the mission command process where subordinates gain the confidence to trust themselves. Calculated risks often produce outcomes favorable to success, or growth. Soldiers must recognize that to accomplish a mission, they should be ready to accept that there are inherent uncertainties in any operation. Though they produce a probability for failure, Soldiers often have to make less than perfect decisions on the battlefield.

Failure is not as consequential in a noncombat operation where there is less likelihood for a loss of life, so it is an effective mechanism for growth. Soldiers will learn how to employ the risk assessment and management process to mitigate this risk to a point where they are comfortable with moving forward in the operation.

### **Beyond Doctrine**

Successful implementation of the mission command process requires consistent effort from both leaders and subordinates. NCOs should understand they are



U.S. Army Sgt. 1st. Class Ronald Bernard, a platoon sergeant in Charlie Company, 1st Battalion, 27th Infantry Regiment "Wolfhounds", 2nd Infantry Brigade Combat Team, 25th Infantry Division, gets accountability of his Soldiers before entering the breaching lane during a combined arms live-fire exercise at Schofield Barracks, Hawaii, August 3, 2018. The exercise is part of an overall training progression in order to maintain combat readiness in preparation for a Joint Readiness Training Center rotation later this year. (U.S. Army photo by 1st Lt. Ryan DeBooy)

the essential element in developing the next generation of leaders. Many Soldiers believe this philosophy exists solely for officers, as a tool to drive the operations process and support prompt and sustained land combat. Mission command extends beyond the confines of ADP 6-0 and influences the very foundation of subordinate leadership development.

Mission command requires leaders to fulfill certain obligations. They must actively engage subordinates and work to create an environment founded on mutual trust. By providing opportunities to experience mission command, leaders allow subordinates to exercise their critical thinking skills through the use of experiential learning. NCOs should allocate periods of reflection during post-operation periods to allow the team to share and discuss reasons for success or failure.

Subordinate development through mission command is also dependent upon learner involvement. Soldiers must commit to actively participate throughout the

entire exercise or operation. They should reflect on their experiences, and then analyze the scenarios and their actions to conceptualize the success or failure of the experience. And finally, Soldiers should use their decision-making and problem-solving abilities to assess and make adjustments required to grow and develop from the experience.

## Conclusion

Army leaders committed to sharing their knowledge and experiences to develop their subordinates will use some measure of mission command. Just as leaders train their Soldiers to master critical Military Occupational Specialty tasks, so should they train to master the complete mission command process. Allow your Soldiers to learn and grow through tangible experience and disciplined initiative, and you may be surprised at the extent to which they will commit to themselves, the mission, and the Army. ■

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## Notes

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