



By Joe Byerly

Following my time in company command, I had the privilege of teaching future company commanders and first sergeants at the Cavalry Leader's Course at Fort Benning, GA. During this assignment, I quickly learned that one of the most misunderstood and mystifying concepts in our doctrine is the mission command philosophy.

While the associated doctrinal publications on mission command provide an explanation of the concept's basic constructs, they don't provide us with a tangible pathway for actually developing a culture of mission command in our units. As a result, many of the students I encountered were jaded or skeptical about the idea of mission command being successfully implemented throughout the U.S. Army. A common theme throughout these conversations was the belief that successfully adopting mission command sits only on the shoulders of the commander, and is not the responsibility of all members of the organization. A simple exercise may offer leaders an azimuth for creating a culture of mission command, and give subordinates the buy-in required to make it happen.

In [\*Switch: How to Change Things When Change is Hard\*](#), authors Chip and Dan Heath offer some excellent insight into the process of individual and organizational change. In their research they found that *even when armed with information, individuals and organizations struggle implementing new ideas or concepts when the path to the goal is not clear*. I believe this is one of the issues with leaders embracing mission command.

[ADRP 6-0, Mission Command](#) defines the six principles of mission command as the following:

1. Build Cohesive teams through mutual trust
2. Create shared understanding
3. Provide clear commander's intent
4. Exercise disciplined initiative
5. Use mission orders
6. Accept prudent risk

## **How do we take these principles and make them a reality in our organizations? How can we clearly articulate an identifiable path towards mission command?**

My personal belief is that mission command is a mindset we have to embrace long before the outset of a large-scale training exercise or real-world operations. It must first be nurtured in garrison, and become an inherent part of the culture of the organization. Based on some of the ideas expressed in the Heath brothers' book, as well as my own experiences, I've developed an exercise that leaders can do with their organizations which may help take mission command from an abstract concept, and provide leaders and subordinates with daily behaviors that everyone can see and feel.

**Step 1:** Educate your unit on the philosophy of mission command. Whether through a leader professional development (LPD) program or train the trainer, *everyone in the organization (down to the private) needs to understand why we need mission command, what it is, and what it isn't.*

In my conversations with future company commanders and first sergeants, I found that very few of them actually read any of the published doctrine on mission command; therefore their understanding of the concept was superficial at best.

**Step 2:** Give a homework assignment. Ask every member of the organization to imagine that overnight the unit whole heartedly embraced the philosophy of mission command, and everyone came into work the next day acting and behaving differently. Based on that premise, answer the following:

- 1.) What would counseling look like for the organization? What would my responsibility be?
- 2.) What would morning physical training look like for the organization? What would my

responsibility be?

3.) What would training events look like for the organization? What would my responsibility be?

4.) What would our organizational leader development program look like?

5.) What would my self-development program look like?

I selected these specific areas of evaluation because a commander and the individual have the ability to influence all of them. Additionally, when these areas are running well they tend to positively impact command climate and esprit de corps.

**Step 3:** Take the answers provided and develop clearly articulated goals and behaviors that provide everyone in the unit with guidelines and visible markers that mission command is actually happening. For example, let's say that several of the comments provided recommend quarterly developmental counseling for everyone, and no counseling will be done with a downloadable/fill-in-the-blank counseling form from the internet. Follow this survey up with some professional development classes by leaders (rank is immaterial) who are known for excellent developmental counseling sessions, and then make this an organizational goal to accomplish by the following quarter.

This exercise has several benefits. First, it emphasizes everyone's role in making mission command a reality within the organization. Second, it takes an abstract concept and turns it into tangible behaviors that can be demonstrated and witnessed on a daily basis by everyone. Finally, it gives each Soldier ownership of the process, and the associated pride that comes with that type of personal investment.

Inculcating mission command into the culture of an organization isn't an easy process and there are going to be plenty of failures along way, but that doesn't mean we shouldn't put forth the effort to make it work. The exercise offered up in this post, is just one of many ways that leaders can take an idea and transform it into something tangible for every member of the team. If you have any feedback or other ideas on making mission command a reality, please share them below in the comments section.

*This post first appeared at [Small Wars Journal](#) on 7/29/2014*

### Share this:

- [Email](#)
- [Tweet](#)
- 
- [Print](#)
- [WhatsApp](#)