



*When it comes to looking for lessons on leadership, I believe most of us stick within our own institutions. In doing so, we miss out on a great body of knowledge that exists throughout ALL of our Sister Services. This particular post is just one example of leadership wisdom that transcends the uniform we wear.*

*I've written extensively on how leaders can make mission command work in organizations, but very rarely have I focused on the follower. Instead of sharing my take on this subject, I'd like to invite you to read a short post by CDR BJ Armstrong, USN which was first published at [Beyond the Objective](#). In his latest book, [21st Century Sims: Innovation, Education, and Leadership for the Modern Era](#), CDR Armstrong highlights the essays of Admiral William S. Sims. The particular essay discussed in this post is titled "Military Character" and it was*

*written almost 100 years before mission command made it into the Army lexicon.*

*-Joe*

by: CDR BJ Armstrong, USN

Recently there has been a great deal written on the leadership ideals of mission command. From the [Chairman of the Joint Chiefs](#) to thoughtful [field and company grade officers](#), there has been a movement to leverage the lessons of the past thirteen years to implement its methods of command and leadership. The foundations of today's concept were laid in the Prussian military a century and a half ago. Possibly because of these continentalist roots, the vast majority of the writing and thinking on the subject has been done by Army officers, even when they sometimes [embrace a naval example](#).

In 1916 the United States Navy eyed the potential that the war in Europe may, at some point, begin to spread. A program was put in place to introduce interested volunteers to the concepts and methods that they would need for naval service if a mass mobilization was required. Lectures commissioned by the Navy's Bureau of Navigation included subjects like coastal defense, torpedo boats, and other technical subjects. Captain William Sims, a well known officer in the service, was asked to deliver a lecture on "military character."

With a subject so broad that he could take it in nearly any direction, Sims avoided the temptation to focus on "the great men" of military leadership. Instead of delivering a lecture on what it took to be an inspiring senior officer with strategic acumen, he focused on the fact that the vast majority of his audience would see service either as enlisted men and non-commissioned officers or as junior officers. His purpose was to examine some of the principles that were required to be a good junior leader.

Sims, like Chairman Dempsey a century later, turned to the Prussian methods and outlined the fundamentals behind mission command:

*If those portions of the army unseen by the commander, and not in direct communication with him, were to await his orders before acting, not only would opportunities be allowed to pass, but other portions of the army, at critical moments, might be left without support. It was understood, therefore, in the Prussian armies of 1866 and 1870, that no order was to be blindly obeyed unless the superior who issued it was actually present, and therefore cognizant of the situation at the time it was received. If this was not the case, the recipient was to use his own judgment, and act as he believed his superior would have directed him to do had he been aware how matters stood.*

Today's writing on the subject, however, tends to focus on the responsibilities of the senior officer. It tends to focus on the importance of trusting subordinates, providing appropriate guidance, and understanding what they owe the men and women under their command. But that is only half of how mission command works. The other half, what the junior officers owe their commander, isn't really talked about that much. A hundred years ago, however, that is exactly what William Sims focused on in his lecture, and subsequent article, on "Military Character."

Sims believed that the subordinate owed his commander, and the whole of the force, two things. First, a good junior officer demonstrated loyalty. Second, a good junior officer demonstrated initiative.

*It involves the two wholly essential twin qualities of loyalty and initiative, and all those qualities that are necessary to inspire and develop them, as well as all those that flow from their combination. Loyalty in itself is always indispensable, but initiative without loyalty is dangerous. It is their intelligent and trained cooperation which is the vital characteristic of modern armies.*

Loyalty without initiative worked just fine if your opponent operated in the same way, and as long as your troops were technically competent. But the moment that such a monolithic system was challenged by a thinking, adapting, enemy it would fall apart. On the other hand initiative without loyalty resulted in a near total degeneration of the chain-of-command. Operational plans and strategic aims would come apart at the seams if everyone just did whatever they wanted.

Sims insisted that the natural and healthy tension between an junior officer's loyalty to his commander and his own personal desire to exercise his judgement was the true key to military success. A successful junior or mid-grade leader needed to be conscious of that balance, and reflect on it in making his or her personal decisions. Today's view of mission command tends to focus on the importance of initiative and the importance of the commander's trust. However, we must also remember that the junior leaders, or subordinates, must trust as well. They must trust in their superiors, remember that sometimes the superior is the one with the bigger picture, and offer their loyalty.

*[The] utmost cannot be achieved unless there is loyalty throughout the organization. It is the one wholly indispensable quality. All officers desire it from their subordinates, and wish to accord it to their superiors, but, unfortunately, through failure to study the important subject of military character, and particularly through failure to estimate the influence of their own characters, methods, bearing, and conduct, upon their subordinates, they often conscientiously pursue a mistaken course.*

It is important that the field grade and company grade officers, who lament that they appear to have lost the trust of their superiors because of micro-management or over-supervision, remember that they too have subordinates. In fact, they may have a much more difficult challenge in implementing mission command since they must be the trusting leader to their


subordinates, but also the loyal follower to their superiors. Finding ourselves in the middle, the question of initiative becomes the centerpiece of whether mission command is properly implemented. When do we take it, when do we expect our subordinates to take it, and when don't we take it? Are we clear about the differences?

As William Sims said, the necessary qualities of effective senior leadership have...

*...been the subject of exhaustive analysis by the masters of war, and they make very interesting and instructive reading; but these writers have told us comparatively little of how we, the subordinates, are to conduct ourselves so as to inspire the maximum effort on the part of our subordinates, to the end that we in turn may render the maximum service to our superiors, and thus promote the maximum efficiency of the whole organization. This is the feature of military training that has been least understood in the past, and is making its way so slowly in some services even at present.*

BJ Armstrong is a PhD candidate in War Studies with King's College London and a member of the Naval Institute Editorial Board. William Sims lecture "Military Character" can be found in full in chapter two of his book "[21st Century Sims: Innovation, Education, and Leadership for the Modern Era](#)." The opinions expressed are presented in his personal capacity.

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