



From ARMY Magazine, Vol. 66, No. 4, April 2016. Copyright © 2016 by the Association of the U.S. Army and reprinted by permission of ARMY Magazine.

By Dave Hodne

Among the many rewards of commanding at the brigade level, the opportunity to mentor, observe and share in the lessons of command is the most profound. In focusing “two levels down,” brigade level commanders are in position to share their experiences with young officers about to assume command for the first time. In coaching subordinate battalion commanders, this relationship among more seasoned commanders allows for reciprocal learning across echelons. My experience in commanding, observing and coaching others on

this important responsibility reaffirms my belief that command is best understood in terms of “intent and climate.”

Almost 20 years ago, before I assumed command of a rifle company in the 25th Infantry Division, a supervisor handed me a copy of Roger Nye’s *The Challenge of Command*. I eagerly digested this book, in which Nye discusses the opportunities of command and addresses the role of a commander as tactician, warrior, moral arbiter, strategist and yes, even mentor.

While commanding companies together, I also recall when two of my friends kicked off the widely popular “Company Command” forums that now include multiple books, magazine articles, online discussions, a collection of “best practices” and peer reflections on training, leader development, setting goals and assessing units. Today, there is no shortage of online resources that offer more specific tricks of the trade, including detailed “how-to” recommendations on almost all administrative processes encountered while in command.

Rare Opportunities

Up front, officers should accept that command opportunities are rare. There are simply far more staff officer positions than command positions. Second, there are no guarantees that you will get to command again, so approach every opportunity to command as if it might be your last.

Third—and this is a lesson likely learned in hindsight— time in command passes quickly. Sadly, some commanders do not appreciate the value of the command experience until they are about to pass the colors. In other cases, commanders never complete their research on how to command, or relax their singular emphasis on mastering processes or developing systems. They learn too late that they should trust their instincts and simply lead and care for people. Others may focus only on how command will affect the next promotion.

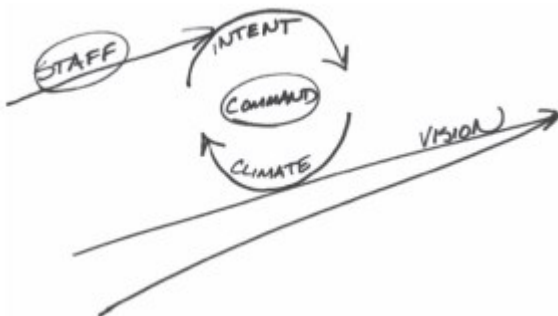
Unfortunately, this condition only devalues command and is also detrimental to a commander's formation.

Which brings me back to my favorite two words about command: intent and climate. Commander's intent, according to Army Doctrine Reference Publication 5-0 The Operations Process, "succinctly describes what constitutes success for the operation." I maintain intent must also be communicated orally. Not only is it much easier for the commander to explain repeatedly for messages to take root, but it is also easier for subordinates to pass on and remember when it is spoken in the commander's familiar jargon.

Defining Climate

I define climate as the tone and stance typically assumed while communicating with people. Climate is who we are, and it's as unique as our individual personalities. In expressing the importance of climate, I remind all new company commanders that command is, indeed, who they are and not a role they are playing. Not only is role-playing exhausting, but soldiers are astute enough to recognize when you are faking it or trying to be someone else. This is a recipe for a poor command climate or sets conditions for inconsistent, toxic leadership.

While commanding my cavalry squadron in Iraq, I drew a simple diagram (below) on a whiteboard during a late-night, impromptu leader development session with a few members of my staff. It has since come to define both my command philosophy and my approach to coaching subordinate commanders.



A commander's vision provides a common purpose or path for all activities within the organization. This vision may be shared across formations based on a larger context such as installation, mission or the next higher echelon's requirements, and it can be tailored to deployed or training environments. While a staff is assigned only to battalions and higher echelons, the relationship of vision, commander's intent and command climate endures at all echelons of command including the company, troop or battery.

Even internal to a company, wise captains assign and divide responsibilities among executive officers, first sergeants, platoon-level leaders and even supply personnel to constitute a rudimentary "staff" necessary for the company to run smoothly.

Missions Accomplished Together

As depicted in the graphic, the commander is, of course, central to the organization. The staff runs the formation, but the commander commands it. Together, they accomplish all missions. Without the exacting efforts of staff and subordinates, the commander cannot achieve his or her vision (or that of higher headquarters), implement intent, or accomplish the mission. It's feasible that a staff can work very hard and expend an enormous amount of

wasted energy that only pushes a unit off course. This results in mission failure as well as a disgruntled staff and confused subordinate units. Careless and incomplete staff work might also require the commander to reiterate his or her intent or worse, temporarily adjust the climate to get the unit back on course.

While commander's intent and command climate originate from the commander's personality and leadership style, one can never underestimate the role of the staff in either enhancing the commander's ability to lead the formation or in defeating efforts, resulting in a poor, dissatisfied command climate and a low-trust organization.

In maintaining a consistent climate and communicating a clear intent, the commander must also remind his staff that there are few things more satisfying, or more necessary to combat effectiveness, than good staff work: timely, detailed, well-reasoned, well-coordinated and well-supervised. This intricate relationship among vision, intent and climate also reinforces the role of the commander in fulfilling his or her responsibilities. In failing to clearly communicate intent, or failing to maintain a positive command climate, commanders will similarly learn the value of communication and interpersonal leadership.

Communicate Among Echelons

Lastly, central to consistent vision in command is the ability to communicate effectively among the Army's nested echelons. These echelons serve as important networks to communicate intent up and down the chain of command. Only through effective communication will commanders share the understanding that's essential to today's doctrine of Mission Command.

Captains, less experienced in this, benefit from the experience of battalion commanders who are uniquely prepared and selected for their position, and involved in the daily actions of

their units. Lieutenant colonels, in command of battalions, now have the responsibility to communicate “two levels up” with general officers and other senior commanders. In this regard, the brigade commander plays an important role in coaching battalion commanders through the art of precise and well-timed communication. This is particularly important when senior commanders at the division and higher may interact less frequently with their subordinate battalions, given today’s wide range of missions and activities across echelons.

As stated earlier, command is rare as well as short-lived. Command is also an honor and should be enjoyable. Even more so, focusing primarily on those things only you can do, and allowing your staff to do their part, makes for a better team writ large. Only the commander can communicate intent and maintain a climate. Both of these are personal in nature but by investing in and paying attention to climate and intent, you will improve not only your interpersonal skills but also your relationship with the formation.

Clear intent and a good command climate create an organization that people will be proud to be part of, one that takes care of soldiers and families and most importantly, sets an example in command for the next generation of leaders.

Brigadier General David Hodne is an Infantry Officer in the United States Army and the former Commander of 1st SBCT, 4th Infantry Division. Follow him on Twitter at @Dave_Hodne.

Share this:

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

- [WhatsApp](#)