



By [Jim King](#)

One of the benefits of being an Observer Controller/Trainer (OC/T) is that we get to stand with one leg in doctrine and the other in reality. We learn the theory, but then watch countless units fight it out in the Mojave desert, moving theory into practice. As an OC/T, I watched 34 field grades lead their staffs in the military decision-making process (MDMP). Below, are some of my observations that new majors can use to bridge the gap between doctrine and practice and make their units more successful in planning.

For the uninitiated, MDMP may be considered a four letter word. Most junior majors know the steps but are unsure how to make the process work for them. This article summarizes MDMP, noting divergence between theory and practice.

Step 1 Receipt of Mission. MDMP theory and application start out well-aligned; it is hard

to botch Step 1. The commander and key staff attend a mission brief from higher headquarters. The XO organizes the staff for MDMP, which will gather resources and update running estimates.

The commander provides initial guidance. The S3 issues Warning Order (WARNO) no. 1 to subordinate units consisting of a mission first draft. The XO publishes a schedule for MDMP and dismisses the staff to initiate planning.

Step 2 Mission Analysis. This step is the most critical. If MDMP were a house, Mission Analysis (MA) is the foundation. Stressed, time-strapped staffs often overlook its importance. This is the point where theory and practice deviate. Ideally, each staff section will digest the base order and relevant annexes to determine specified, implied, and essential tasks; assets available and shortfalls; limitations; and facts and assumptions.

During MA, the S2 leads Intelligence Preparation of the Battlefield (IPB). Good IPB involves the entire staff, with each section providing functional threat estimates. The S2 crafts the initial collection plan while the S3 drafts proposed problem and mission statements, Information Requirements, and Commander's Intent. Following the MA brief, the S3 publishes WARNO no. 2, which will become the operation order (OPORD) for recon elements that must initiate movement before completion of MDMP.

That's the *theory*; in practice, after the XO initiates MA, each section will hastily read its own annex, build slides, and wait. Meanwhile the S3 has skipped ahead to Course of Action (COA) Development without regard for enemy actions, partially because the staff wants nothing to do with IPB, leaving the S2 bemoaning a lack of time to provide useful intelligence to the S3's planning effort.

Step 3 Course of Action Development. There is no set number, but the staff - led by the S3 - should develop sufficient COAs to give the commander flexibility and options. The

commander may select pieces of each COA to innovate a new one. For each COA, the staff assesses relative combat power, arrays units, and assigns forces based on mission tasks, location, and expertise. The S3 or XO screens each COA for suitability, feasibility, acceptability, distinguishability, and completeness. Output includes COA statements, sketches, and revised planning guidance from the commander.

In the real world, while the staff is briefing MA, S3 planners are sequestered, feverishly drawing blue icons on a map, often without regard for templated enemy locations. The planners want to get it done fast and proceed to the written order. The staff enters the COA Development brief with little understanding of the plan and how each warfighting function fits within it.

Step 4 Course of Action Analysis. COA Analysis (“war gaming”) can be contentious. Like MA, COA Analysis is important and often overlooked. This step informs and enables the commander to choose the best COA. During this step, the S3 and S2 array friendly and enemy forces. War game moves consist of actions (offense), reactions (defense), and counteractions (offense). The XO acts as referee to ensure impartiality, realism, and feasibility. A scribe keeps a record of each action or event that will be the basis for the sync matrix and execution checklist, key documents for the overall mission plan.

In reality, the S3 probably will overpower the S2 and declare victory with no major complications or need for alterations. Or the S2 will be too eager to allow the S3 to win and not put up a fight. The rest of the staff meanders, only mildly interested, providing limited input of value.

Step 5 COA Comparison. Next, the staff evaluates war gaming results to determine the most effective COA. Common criteria include level of operational risk, force posture for follow-on operations, and opportunity to exercise initiative. The staff briefs findings to the commander.

In practice this step is often skipped. If the staff does not conduct a proper war game in Step 4, they likely will misunderstand COA differences. Frequently the staff only develops or analyzes one complete COA. Sometimes this is due to time constraints but often it is simply because the staff is exhausted from the planning process and are eager to complete the plan.

Step 6 COA Approval. Few staffs deviate from theory here. The S3 briefs the results of COA Analysis and Comparison to the commander. Staff primaries will cross their fingers that the commander agrees and does not direct changes or (heaven forbid) a new COA. Upon COA selection, the S3 publishes another WARNO with all available information, permitting subordinate units to refine planning. Adept subordinate units will have already begun MDMP without waiting for a finished OPORD.

Step 7 Orders Production. The S3 will build the base order while the staff drafts warfighting functional annexes. Vital tasks should be included in the base order or risk being lost in annexes.

MDMP is a powerful tool for planning complex operations. The [Center for Army Lessons Learned Handbook No. 15-06](#) sharpens this tool by providing an in-depth examination of each step. Inevitably, there will be times when the S2 and S3 find themselves in the back of a combat vehicle feverishly scribbling red and blue icons on a map. Real life can be an obstacle to the planning process; but applied correctly, MDMP enables commanders to make the best decisions to achieve military objectives.

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