



By Josh Suthoff

Recently, the Army Times published [an interview with TRADOC Commander, GEN Stephen Townsend](#) in which the primary point of discussion was that the decades-long Global War on Terrorism (GWOT) has eroded the decision making confidence of young leaders. Unfortunately, a perceived loss of decision-making ability is only a symptom of a larger issue.

The Army has a problem with underwriting acceptable risk, the trust that comes with acceptance of risk, and its effects on mission command. This is evident in how the Army manages information, leverages technology, and trains and manages risk in garrison and deployed environments.

Systemic Misuse

The U.S. Army's current misuse of systems and technology erodes the trust and confidence required to achieve the mission command philosophy. Email, full motion video, and mission command systems allow every echelon, from battalion to corps, to see platoon action on the battlefield or in garrison. The ease of access creates a temptation to reach out to that lower echelon instead of letting the situation develop. In recent years the term "flat organization" is routinely used regardless if the user understands its full effects and meaning. There is no doubt that technology allows units to understand intent and build shared understanding. However, how does it erode decision making confidence? What does it do to a junior leader when every echelon at corps and below can scrutinize and question a plan? The safety net of an easily-accessible commander in training and garrison takes that pressure off the junior leader at the point of friction. Technology does not allow for leaders to let the situation develop and work to solve the problem.

Low Risk Tolerance for Rising Leaders

Leaders must be allowed to develop the situation and possibly fail. Unfortunately the system doesn't allow that. Professional Soldiers know that one "Highly Qualified" evaluation puts their chances of command or select positions in jeopardy. Therefore many end up playing it safe to avoid failure. They micromanage junior leaders to avoid mistakes. They give tasks that were once for a promising specialist, young sergeant, or a capable lieutenant, to higher ranks.

Failure to Assess Risk in Planning and Operations at CTCs

In recent years, use of mission orders has been reinforced through renewed focus and multiple decisive action rotations in an effort to reduce risk to mission and Soldiers. A battalion or brigade staff that doesn't execute MDMP and doctrinal orders will be quickly "coached and mentored" on the error of their ways by observer controllers (OCs), regardless of the tactical success of the mission. This zealot-like adherence to doctrine leaves only the curious professionals to decipher what is form and function in staff drills like war gaming and combined arms rehearsals. Leaders and staff must understand that knowing the process allows you to abbreviate the steps when the tactical situation calls for it and accept the risk. War gaming cannot go on for hours in a staff mental ballet when the situation at the FLOT or OE is changing. ADRP 6-0 fails to clarify or prioritize risk and planning by stating in the same paragraph that "Commanders avoid inadequate planning and preparation" and "Commanders also avoid delaying action while waiting for perfect intelligence and synchronization".

Unfortunately, the Army fights and trains on two different plains of prudent risk. A

battalion or company commander can plan and fight a decisive action mission at a training center with little to no regard to actual casualty figures and its overall effect on tempo and mission success. Commanders conduct operations and assume levels of tactical risk at levels much higher than would be allowed in combat or underwritten by their commander. Understandably a unit at a training center cannot spend days going through the exercise of receiving new replacements and equipment, but the loss and replacement of service members have become a drill for the S1, S4s, 1SGs, and CSMs. We continue to muddy the training objectives by demanding that commanders be aggressive, but chastise units when the died of wound (DOW) rates are too high. If a unit fights in restrictive terrain, the DOW will be high due to the time it takes to get the casualties out of the terrain and to the next level of care. If a unit attacks through the middle of the engagement area they will have significant casualties, but low DOWs. Commanders and staff must train to assume the appropriate level of risk when it makes tactical sense.

Low Risk Tolerance in Theaters of Operation

Conversely, in Iraq or Afghanistan, junior leaders are either taken out of the risk acceptance process or micromanaged by echelons of headquarters where the primary focus becomes the combat patrol. Some of this attention and concern is obviously political and some of it is a coaching aspect. Junior leaders in 2002 or 2006, as the article mentioned, were not micromanaged. They were not micromanaged because we, as an Army, were trying to figure out the OE, COIN, and there were a large number of operations going on simultaneously. There was not a tribal knowledge on the right way to execute company level and below COIN operations. The platoon leaders and company commanders of 2002 are now the senior leaders.

One has to look no further than Army acquisitions to understand the Army's position on risk. As an Army, we rarely reduce protection at the benefit of other tenants, like lethality or mobility. The mobile protective fire power platform (MPF) is a good example, it was recently decided that the Army wanted a MFP system with more armor at the sacrifice of being air droppable. How does a non-airborne system help paratroopers secure the airhead line?

Prudent Risk and Mutual Trust

Prudent risk is tied to mutual trust and it starts in garrison and training. Mutual trust cannot be built if every small issue is immediately brought to the forefront over email and across a mass distro. The Army must let the junior leader do what they are paid to do, lead. Understandably, professional Soldiers are concerned about their career and there is a strong desire to jump in and save the situation immediately. As an Army, we have taken

“trust but verify” to mean you must verify and inspect everything. This does not excuse leaders from spot checking and requiring back briefs, but if the Army expects independent and confident leaders then they must be allowed to practice the concept.

If the GWOT has created any negative effects on the Army (as the article implies) it has eroded the trust between conventional units and their military and political leaders. All operations with any type of increased risk are more than likely assigned to Special Operations Forces (SOF). This lack of trust does not sit well with junior leaders who joined the military to fight for their country. What does it say about their training readiness of conventional forces when a brigade combat team conducts a decisive action train up and is not allowed to execute combat operations while deployed? Advising an Afghan Kandak commander on how to plan and employ combined arms does not take a Special Forces Soldier. A conventional company or battalion commander that has executed multiple training scenarios on those principles could do the same. This doesn't reduce overall readiness, it builds it and the Army now has a company commander or junior leader that has actually employed enablers on the battlefield all while teaching their partner force. There is no better way to train a leader than to have them train others.

ADRP 6-0 states, “The willingness to accept prudent risk is often the key to exposing enemy weaknesses”. By this logic the US Army is without a doubt exposing theirs. If US special operations forces are stretched too thin, then let conventional forces take the missions that make sense. Risk reduction cannot be the primary objective of a tactical operation, this mindset only prolongs the conflict and fails to reach a decisive point. You can see examples in the changing in tactics of both theaters when the Army expanded from large FOBs to patrol bases, reduction of these forward platforms, the ever-increasing protective size of combat vehicles (HMMWV, MRAP, MATV), and increased approval chains for mission CONOPs. There is little doubt that these risk mitigation measures have prolonged the strategic goals in both theaters. Most importantly, failure to build trust with our junior leaders will only cause them to leave the conventional force.

The scenario used in the [article](#) mentions that the Army wants junior leaders that can make decisions during a conflict with Russia. The scenario is almost laughable when you apply the construct of how the Army currently manages risk. A conflict with a near peer, especially during opening engagements would no doubt create a large number of US casualties. First, the US public barely tolerates single digit casualties from Iraq or Afghanistan where there is an emotional link to 9/11 and terrorism. How will the American public feel when a brigade size element is lost in the opening engagements of some vaguely known Baltic or Eastern European country? Additionally, the Army which has been practicing constrained mission command in a deployed environment for over the past ten years is not going to suddenly

transition from command and control to mission command. No, first it will imploded under the weight of the task and be forced into a cultural change.

Recommendations

We need to stop blaming the GWOT for the leadership shortfalls of the Army. If it wasn't for the GWOT, the US Army would have few combat veterans with the experience to be concerned about the current state. The Army needs good junior leaders who will mature into senior leaders and here are some recommendations on how to fix this:

1. Codify the difference between a military chain of command and a flat organization. They mean different things. What echelon of leadership really needs to be reviewing platoon operations? If it is battalion commander level, then let the battalion commander do what they are paid to do, lead.
2. The Army and units need to review what the minimum rank is for training and operations and adjust to a lower level. For example, does the range safety officer for a range really need to be an E6?
3. Train the full MDMP process, but practice abbreviated ones so commanders and staff know what to accept risk on.
4. Review the promotion timeline and criteria to promote those that take risk and learn from mistakes. The Army needs leaders that thrive on ambiguity and little guidance. As an Army, we say we want to practice talent management, but still adhere to the rigidity of below and primary zone promotions. In a near peer conflict, the Army will not be able to promote leaders fast enough, we need to figure out what we are looking for today.

In conclusion, one only needs to look to the opening battles of World War I and II or the opening months of the Korean War to understand that in a near peer fight the losses will come fast. It's on the junior leaders to do the right thing and enforce the standards to keep their units alive long enough for the US Military to regain the initiative. But first we need to be honest with ourselves, the GWOT didn't erode leader confidence, our own systems, personalities, and failure to manage risk did.

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