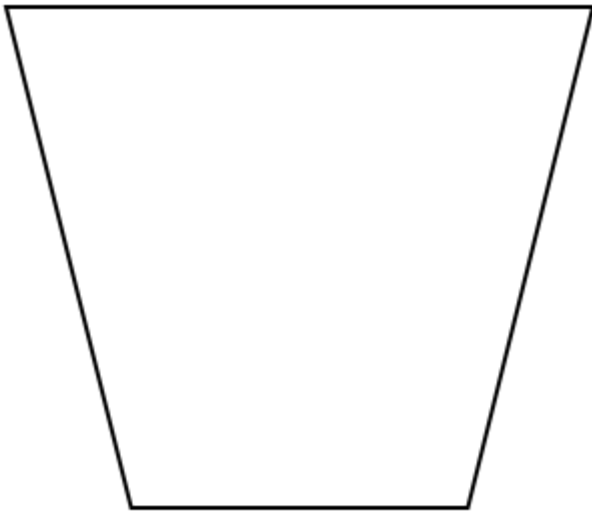




By Terron Warton

The Oxford English Dictionary provides three definitions for capacity. Two of those definitions stood out to me. Capacity is both the amount that something can contain and the amount that something can produce. Individuals and organizations today have more tasks and work than they can possibly accomplish. Still, we often try to do everything and are shocked when we experience inefficiency, poor performance, and failure. The reason is simple: we cannot do it all because our capacity is finite. Maximizing performance requires leaders to manage their subordinates' and organization's capacity. By providing a mental model to manage capacity we provide to maximize individual and organizational performance.

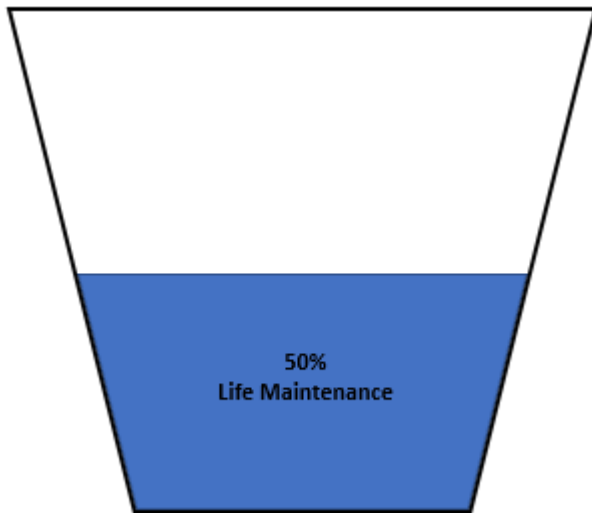
The Capacity Cup



The Capacity Cup

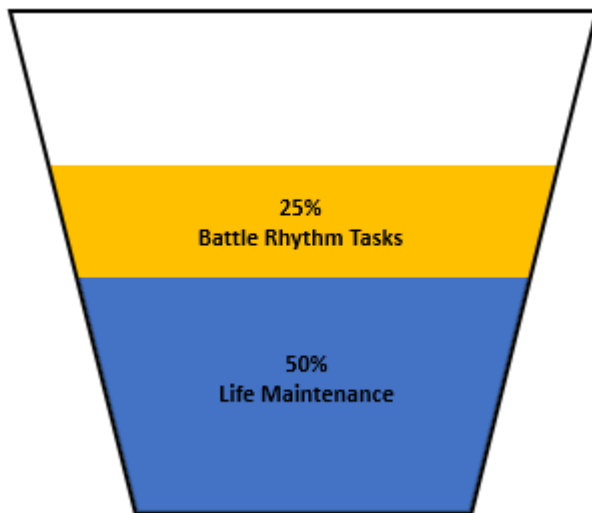
The Capacity Cup provides a model for leaders to manage capacity, thereby maximizing performance. All organizations and individuals have a set capacity. This capacity may grow and improve with experience and training. However, regardless of how small or great the capacity, it is ALWAYS finite.

About 25-50% of the Capacity Cup is filled by "Life Maintenance".



These are routine actions and decisions occurring every day: what to eat, chores and errands, social interaction, etc. In addition, this amount varies based on life circumstances, as stressful or challenging periods may require more capacity. Organizations also have the same type of “life maintenance” requirements. These are the basic functions an organization requires to operate, such as updating systems of record, supply requisitions, paperwork, and other daily minutia.

Another 25% of our capacity is filled with our daily battle rhythm tasks.



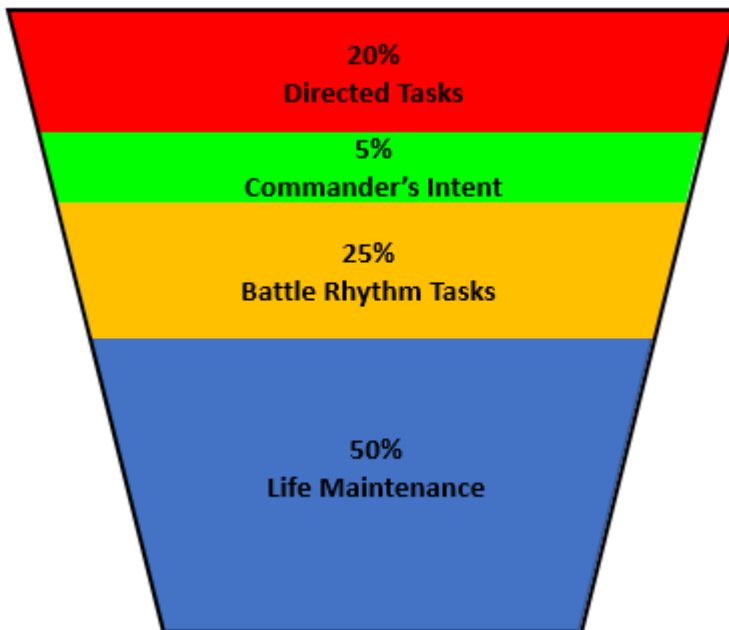
These are the reports, meetings, briefings, and other events occurring at routine intervals. They seldom change, but occur less frequently than the daily life maintenance tasks.

A Tale of Two Cups

After basic and routine tasks are accounted for there is roughly 25% remaining in the capacity cup. This is the “Leader Space”. Here is where leaders have the most impact and control of subordinate and organizational capacity. By appropriately managing this space we set conditions for critical and creative thinking. This, in turn, enables disciplined initiative, a key tenet of Mission Command. Subordinates exercising disciplined initiative react to and solve unanticipated problems that threaten the commander’s intent, tempo, or mission accomplishment. Without room to think critically and creatively, subordinates cannot exercise the initiative required to achieve the commander’s intent in the face of friction.

If a leader is not deliberate and prudent in directing requirements and assigning tasks, they

can quickly fill their subordinate's and organization's capacity cups:



This Capacity Cup leaves no room for the critical and creative thinking required to execute disciplined initiative. Without disciplined initiative, organizations and subordinates will be slow in reacting to unforeseen problems and adversity. Worse, any unexpected friction will now require the leader's direct involvement to issue a new set of directives. As a result, the leader, organization, and subordinates will always remain reactive and rarely gain initiative.

A subordinate cannot indefinitely sustain operating at 100% capacity. If the cup is filled to 100% three things happen. First, additional and emerging tasks cannot be completed. Second, if a leader continues to add things the cup will overflow, leaving other tasks unaccomplished or poorly done. Finally, with no capacity left to mentally reset, subordinates can experience burnout, ultimately lowering efficiency over time. While certain situations may require subordinates to run at 100% capacity for critical periods,

leaders must carefully manage those instances and ensure to allot recovery time afterwards.

Maximizing performance requires leaving subordinates capacity for critical and creative thinking. As such, the critical elements become a clear commander's intent and a small number of directed tasks covering key requirements.

The empty capacity given to the subordinates stimulates creative and critical thinking and enables disciplined initiative. Additionally, that untasked capacity allows subordinates time to mentally recover or refresh themselves after surge periods, maintaining long-term efficiency and preventing burnout.

So how does the Capacity Cup connect to Mission Command? Mission Command has six principles:

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

Providing a clear commander's intent is its own principle and helps foster shared understanding. Limiting directed tasks forces leaders to give mission type orders and accept prudent risk. Furthermore, by not dictating every task to our subordinates, leaders demonstrate trust. Finally, by leaving spare capacity, we set conditions for critical and creative thinking, ultimately enabling subordinates to exercise disciplined initiative to fulfill the commander's intent, overcome friction, and increase organizational efficiency and performance.

Managing Capacity

Successfully managing the Capacity Cup requires leaders to know when the cup is full and how to empty it. As we discussed before, individuals and organizations can surge to 100% capacity for limited, critical periods without losing effectiveness, but they ultimately suffer deleterious effects if this state lasts too long. Knowing when the cup is full requires engaged leadership. At the individual level, engaged leadership requires leaders to know and understand their subordinates' skills, knowledge, and talents. Leaders determine these factors through observing their subordinate's work; coaching, teaching, and mentoring; and providing feedback and a structured path for development. By doing these things, a leader will gain an appreciation of a subordinate's strengths, weaknesses, and where their capacity lies.

At the organizational level, collective training, after-action reviews, sensing sessions, and command climate surveys inform leaders on both their organization's capacity as well as how full the organization's cup is. Unengaged leaders cannot manage capacity because they cannot answer the fundamental questions: What capacity exists and how much is being used? Leaders must be and remain engaged to know when they've filled the cup and when it's starting to overflow.

Leaders have several tools to empty the Capacity Cup and free up space for critical and creative thinking. While leaders cannot change what falls under life maintenance, they can influence the impact. Connecting individuals with services such as counseling, financial planning, childcare, and others can help mitigate life maintenance requirements and stressors, subsequently freeing up capacity. For organizations, disciplined systems and processes enable these functions to become routine, reducing the amount of capacity an organization spends on the basics.

For battle rhythm events, read ahead products let individuals digest data ahead of time. This translates to both time savings and increased productivity as less time is taken up

discussing data and participants can focus energy on generating solutions. Clear agendas, inputs, and outputs also help to reduce time spent in meetings and briefings. Finally, leaders and organizations must review their battle rhythm regularly. Does this meeting enable a decision? Does the weekly close out report provide value for the leader? If organizations find a product or event does not add value then it should be cut. This empties the cup and frees capacity.

The Leader Space is where leaders can have the most impact in managing capacity. Simply put, everything in the last 25% is under the leader's direct control. Effectively managing the Leader Space goes hand in hand with embracing mission command. By providing clear intent and only directing the most critical tasks, leaders create the spare capacity for critical and creative thinking. This, in turn allows for disciplined initiative and, ultimately, increases both individual and organizational output.

There is always one more thing that needs doing. As a result, leaders must pick and prioritize where their organizations focus their efforts. By managing capacity, leaders can effectively set conditions to realize Mission Command and improve organizational performance.

Terron Wharton is currently a BDE XO in an ABCT. An Armor Officer, he has served in Armor and Stryker Brigade Combat Teams with operational experience in Iraq and Afghanistan. He is also the author of "High Risk Soldier: Trauma and Triumph in the Global War on Terror", a work dealing with overcoming the effects of PTSD. His other works include "Becoming Multilingual", discussing being multifaceted within the Army profession, and "How to Fail As a Major", in which he shares advice to new Majors as they start their transition to the Field Grade ranks.

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