



NORMAN ROCKWELL MUSEUM

By Eric Shockley

This past week the reality of the Coronavirus hit those of us in the Army in earnest. Leave plans were cancelled, hospitals and clinics became the front lines, and we jumped headlong into the concept of telework. I spent the week laid up in bed with what luckily only turned out to be pneumonia.

Once the meds dealt with my fever, I spent the bulk my days in front of my government laptop. As we gained a greater understanding of the situation, our orders adjusted with it,

and I found myself reminding my soldiers that an order I gave at 8am may change by noon.

By the end of the week I could see that the big green machine was getting its legs. So, I wondered what else could be gleaned from Week One of our response (which I'm sure will inevitably be given a campaign name).

Rely on our training

While this is the first time our generation has had to fight a pandemic, our training and our experiences are applicable. We establish priority information requirements, we make planning assumptions about what will happen or what reality is, and we send out reconnaissance elements to try and get answers. In this case the enemy just happens to be a virus, and it's like the entire DoD decided to do a CPX together. Lessons will be learned, but there's no need to re-learn tactics and techniques that we already know how to do.

Orders still need to be understandable and executable

Second, as technology has become more and more accessible, painfully long orders and briefs have become the norm. Just like we often fail at it with our more typical missions, we're failing at it now. So, for the staffs out there, get to the point and clear away the clutter. Go back and review those published orders, and then put in the work to publish a cleaned up, cohesive, and current order. Each level of command has to remember that there is a smaller element below them, with fewer resources. Somewhere along the way those orders have to get distilled to the point that a leader at the squad or platoon level can issue it using troop leading procedures, sans slides and book-sized written orders.

There are still opportunities to lead

Third, there's a time for command there's a time for control. In this case, I see lots of control going on. This makes sense given the rapid changes in the situation, and that if we don't do these things right, and right now, it could go from bad to worse. But there's still opportunity for command.

As an example, in our unit we still had to conduct command maintenance. Our brigade (it's a consolidated motor pool), established which units had access on which days, and allowed direct coordination between units. Our battalion did the same thing, setting time slots on our designated day. And that's I needed them to do. By leaving me the freedom to

command, we came up with ways to disperse the equipment and divide up duties. This allowed us to meet the social distancing guidelines, but still accomplish the mission.

One of the beautiful things that has come to light during this event has been the ingenuity we're seeing in the civilian sector as businesses shift gears to make needed products, and people find new ways to make curbside and delivery service work. We have that same creativity in our Army, if we just give junior leaders their limits and let them get to work.

Now is the time for empathy and prioritization

Fourth, we are wholly unfamiliar with telework. If you've ever tried to get a full day of work in while on your computer, with suddenly out of school kids tearing through the house, you know that you might get three hours, four tops. For leaders, it's time to practice empathy, figuring out how things are actually happening at the Soldier level. By doing so, we may find that we've established things as priorities when they really aren't, and we're assigning work just to keep Soldiers busy, which is probably not the best use of their time. And if you think about how you spend most of the day getting distracted by meetings, a missing chock block in the motor pool, or the latest painful Powerpoint briefing, you know you probably aren't accomplishing as much as you think you are.

So, a mentality of "We'll get all the annual online training done TODAY" doesn't match with reality. Assign "homework" that's actually achievable. Remember, we have Soldiers at home right now that have to homeschool their kids for the next month, don't have their own government computer, and didn't choose their home for its "home office" space. The vast majority of Soldiers want to accomplish whatever mission you give them. We have to trust that they'll do it.

So, is it bad? Sure. But it's nothing we can't handle. The important thing is that we DO handle it. Because our enemies are watching. Everything from how our Soldiers individually respond to the virus, to how the Army organizes and fights, to how we mobilize our national industrial base. And they're learning.

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