by Matthew Schardt

I am as eager as anyone to get beyond the human and economic suffering associated with the current pandemic. Thankfully, the promise of vaccinations gives me hope that life around the Army and the country as a whole will come to resemble a pre-pandemic "normal" soon.

Even when the country recovers from the worst of the pandemic (and it will), the Army should be cautious not to revert to pre-pandemic processes, practices, and habits. Instead, it should build upon them. Last year's innovations helped the Army mitigate the threat the virus posed to its mission and people. These same innovations offer the Army opportunities for an improved future.

For example, the pandemic drove many across the Army to hold meetings virtually. Going

forward, leaders should continue to meet virtually, especially those meetings that simply exist to distribute information. Examples include staff update briefs, calendar reviews, and staff syncs. Imagine the time saved within a brigade combat team (BCT) if a leader did not have to drive from the battalion motor pool or battalion headquarters to the brigade or the division headquarters for the weekly calendar sync and, instead, collaborated with their higher headquarters via virtual meeting software. The ten or fifteen-minute commute saved, each way, could instead be reinvested into events like inspections, maintenance operations, and counseling that are not ideal for virtual workspace. Virtual meeting software also allows for work to be conducted from locations away from the traditional office, allowing leaders to better support spouses and childcare responsibilities. As an added benefit, if a leader is unable to attend the virtual meeting at the designated time due to a competing requirement, a video recording of the meeting can be shared with them...something unheard of pre-pandemic.

The Army should also continue to carefully review the need for travel and question the need for most temporary duty (TDY) travel. Last year, the Department of Defense (DOD) placed travel restrictions on the force to protect Service Members, DOD employees, and families from the virus. The restrictions forced the cancellation of most temporary duty. As opportunities for business travel return, the Army should remain committed to travel restrictions. How many of the planning conferences, briefings, and staff syncs that previously necessitated a two- to three-day TDY could be replaced with a few hours, or less, in a virtual meeting? How many travel dollars could be relocated to other priorities? While the pandemic's impact on long-term U.S. defense spending remains a subject of debate, reducing travel expenditures is an easy way to save costs.

Further, the momentum to digitize and automate recurring processes at the installation level should be built upon. In response to travel restrictions and stay-at-home orders, installations across the Army have digitized their inprocessing and outprocessing procedures. As we return to normal, these efforts should not fall by the wayside.

Reoccurring briefings, such as transportation and levy briefings should be recorded and delivered via learning management software. The standard installation inprocessing and outprocessing forms should equally be digitized. Digital signatures can replace the legacy directorate stamps that traditionally required an arriving or departing soldier to crisscross an installation to obtain signatures. Installation hotels and transient lodging locations should have business centers and computers equipped with the appropriate software and internet connectivity to facilitate inprocessing and outprocessing actions.

Throughout the pandemic, the DOD encouraged supervisors to maximize human resource flexibilities such as telework and alternative work schedules in response to the pandemic. The DOD also took several other actions in order to make conducting remote work more accessible. These same innovations should expand. Doing so allows installations impacted by adverse weather to maintain productivity despite the closure of in-person facilities. Additionally, improved remote work regulations and agreements may enable installations to hire additional talent – particularly civilians and contractors. Individuals not inclined to live at a particular installation may be willing to contribute to an installation's mission from the comfort of their home. The Army may discover that some people, working remotely from a location of their choosing, might do more with less. Many across the country are reassessing their decision to live and work where they do in the age of telework. Why not the Army?

Distributed work also holds the potential for building installation resilience. A distributed workforce hardens an installation against attack and continues to enable critical functions in the event of an attack. Installations within missile range of American adversaries could particularly benefit from a geographically distributed workforce.

Force health protection also stands to improve if habits ingrained during the pandemic are built upon. Telemedicine surged during pandemic. Providers were able to provide quick non-emergent care to more patients than ever before. Online systems for digital check-in and health questionnaires eliminated the time patients had to wait when receiving in-person

care leading to a more succinct process.The Defense Health Agency and Department of Veterans Affairs should continue to build upon this momentum to refine the technologies and practices that will enable improved care in the future.

At the unit level, the pandemic provided leaders with plenty of reasons to reinforce best health practices. Leaders encouraged subordinates to frequently wash their hands, wear a face covering, and frequently sanitize their workspaces. The Army discouraged the attitude that "leaders don't have time to be sick." Officers and non-commissioned officers encouraged soldiers to stay at home when they felt ill. Army leadership pursued an aggressive social media campaign to encourage soldiers to get their annual vaccinations. The results have been impressive. Flu activity is unusually low this year. As some analysts suggest that COVID-19 may become endemic and that influenzas are annual occurrences, the Army's focus on public health best practices should continue.

The pandemic also led to changes in the delivery of professional military education. West Point, like many other educational institutions, made strides in the delivery of virtual coursework during the pandemic. Training and Doctrine Command digitized 600 courses last year. The Army hosted professional forums such as the Association of the United States Army (AUSA) Annual Meeting and the Maneuver Warfighter Conference virtually in 2020. These changes should be built upon; they hold the promise of improved military education.

For example, temporary duty in support of many professional military education courses should be curtailed or eliminated. Doing so saves costs and limits time away from family. Otherwise, soldiers who would miss education and training opportunities due to illness, surgery, athletic competition, or family considerations can either attend class remotely or make-up the lesson by watching a pre-recorded video. Guest speakers who might not otherwise be able to devote the days for travel can likely dedicate a couple of hours to address students at West Point, the Command and General Staff College, or the War College from their home. Hosting professional forums remotely enables senior leaders to

communicate with a broader audience and allows for increased participation from junior leaders.

The pandemic also catalyst improved situational awareness and shared understanding. For example, the pandemic inspired improvements in virtual wargaming. At West Point, the Superintendent, Lieutenant General Darryl Williams, leveraged new technologies to improve the outcomes of the traditional military decision-making process. During the pandemic, Lt. Gen. Williams used Microsoft Teams to receive daily updates from his staff and surrounding community leaders. At the same meeting, Lt. Gen. Williams communicated his intent and priorities. The West Point staff leveraged virtual meeting software to build cross-functional teams for planning, develop threat models, and plan West Point's response to the virus. West Point also executed numerous rehearsals and after-action reviews during the pandemic – nearly all of them contained a virtual component or "live-stream" options. In all instances, hundreds of West Point staff and faculty, who normally would not have been able to attend due to physical space constraints, participated. More importantly, those same participants, at the conclusion of the briefing or rehearsal, took immediate actions in line with the Superintendent's intent. The time for decision-making and action shrank.

Going forward, commanders and staffs from across the force ought to explore ways technologies and processes can assist in the planning, preparation, assessment, and execution of the operations process. Imagine staffs utilizing virtual meeting software to conduct future planning miles away from the brigade headquarters and the current "fight." Live-streamed rehearsals and after-action reviews, particularly those at the Army's training centers, offer opportunities for improved learning and understanding across the Army.

Finally, the pandemic inspired a change in the Army's identity. While leaders past and present have argued the importance of autonomy and dispersion in modern combat, it was not until the pandemic that the Army was forced to truly embrace these concepts. Whereas prior to the pandemic leaders could pay lip service to distributed command and control and,

on occasion, practice it at a mission command training program (MCTP) or combined training center rotation, the Army rarely "lived" distributed mission command. The pandemic changed that. Regardless of the inconvenience or sub-optimal conditions, leaders across the Army had to find a way to protect the force and accomplish their mission while separated. And they did.

Going forward, the Army should continue to embrace this new identity – even if the identity is difficult and, in some cases, suboptimal. Recommendations from the Army's training centers for addressing challenges of distributed command and control support this. The training centers suggest that units codify standard operating procedures, institute deliberate training programs to improve training proficiencies on mission command information systems, and not wait until a deployment or CTC rotation to validate command and control systems. In other words, the training centers suggest making distributed command and control a habit.

To be clear, you can't telecommute to combat. Ultimately, the Army is asked to prevail in competition, conflict, and crisis…in-person and amongst people. Addressing the corrosives that break trust between Soldiers and the American people – sexual assault, above-average suicide rates, racism, and extremism – demand in-person solutions and discussion. Leadership by wandering around still has its place. Not every education or training event is best delivered virtually. The blurring of professional and personal obligations in a remote environment carries numerous challenges. Automation and digitization may lead to job loss. Connectivity and accessibility to the technologies that enable improved productivity must be addressed. Mission command technologies and systems must be hardened against adversary attack.

While we acknowledge these challenges, we should not use them as an excuse to revert to pre-pandemic behaviors, processes, and habits. Daily actions mirror the type of person or organization you believe, consciously or subconsciously, that you are. The Army successfully

navigated the recent past by innovating, embracing change, and internalizing an improved identity. Those same innovations and identity offer the Army opportunity for an improved future.

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