

Accepting Risk in a Postmodern Military: Reducing Dependency on Information Through Creative and Critical Thinking



by Marc Meybaum

The radio squawks to life, a message flashes on the screen in front of you, and your cell phone vibrates on the dash. As you sit in your vehicle during a field training exercise you cannot escape the seemingly endless requests for information.

In the modern world, advanced digital devices combined with the internet offer us immediate access to more information than leaders even twenty years ago could have imagined. However, this capability is not without costs. The increasing presence of misinformation, enemy cyber capabilities, and the sheer volume of data available presents a serious challenge as we struggle to process this information, analyze it in a timely manner, and make appropriate decisions.

Additionally, the consistent and immediate availability of information via the internet is taking its toll on our individual ability to deal with uncertainty. In our garrison training environments, we have near perfect information for every decision that we make and when we don't, we can rely on our digital communications to quickly contact those that do. It is safe to say these are not the conditions one should anticipate in a future fight.

As our Army prepares to face the complexity of future wars, it is well understood that leaders at all levels of the modern Army must be able to make decisions quickly while operating in chaotic and contested environments. Critical and creative thinking combined with the appropriate amount of risk acceptance are fundamental skills for Army leaders.

Whether it be in a military-technical, geo-cultural-political, leader-human development or moral-ethical [field of expertise](#), leaders must have the ability to quickly analyze available information and translate this knowledge into mission orders and subsequent [shared understanding](#) for their organizations.

Our comfortable attachment to digital information sources and a reliable fully functioning communications network presents a significant vulnerability to our Army. How do we guard against this threat? The answers lie in our doctrine of mission command and our ability to apply critical thinking. As our [mission command doctrine](#) states:

Military operations are inherently human endeavors, characterized by violence and continuous adaptation by all participants. Successful execution requires Army forces to make and implement effective decisions faster than enemy forces. Therefore, the Army has adopted mission command as its approach to command and control that empowers subordinate decision making and decentralized execution appropriate to the situation.

To carry out decentralized execution within a mission command framework, Army leaders must possess an expert ability to think critically and creatively. We must utilize critical thinking to make sense of our environment and creative thinking to develop innovative solutions. While Army leaders are generally familiar with this imperative for critical and creative thinking, it is not developed or reinforced in a deliberate way.

Additionally, our current environment obviates risk acceptance and initiative by way of readily available and prolific means of communication. Instead of exercising their professional judgment in line with the commander's intent, our young leaders are learning that it is easier to text someone for clarification. We frequently ignore the negative impacts of redundant situation reports and the insistence on robust and immediate communication for every phase of operation. We erode our tolerance for risk acceptance and become uncomfortable operating without continuous communication. Our past can inform our future. History tells us that success in large scale ground combat routinely relies on subordinate understanding of organizational objectives. In turn, this understanding promotes the disciplined, decentralized initiative critical for mission success. American paratroopers landing in Normandy and armored cavalrymen at 73 Easting could attest to the effectiveness of decisive initiative in complex and chaotic environments.

Every leader has heard the well-worn axiom "train like you fight!" We need to begin training our next generation to be comfortable analyzing ambiguous situations and accepting prudent risk to achieve organizational objectives in the absence of direct communications. To do this we must take simple steps toward developing critical and creative thinkers who

have the confidence to make decisions.

The purpose of this article is not to recommend sweeping changes to Army training. Rather, it is to offer small adjustments that can make our current training environments more conducive to the development of critical thinking. Garrison training environments can provide a suitable venue to practice critical and creative thinking; however, the conditions for such development must be set in a deliberate and intentional manner.

There are several ways we can intentionally improve critical thinking development in our emerging leaders.

Cut the Cord

To build confident subordinate leaders, we need to place them in situations where they are permitted to make decisions without the comfort of continuous communications. This is already being practiced in some areas of the Army. However, cell phones should never be permitted as a primary or alternate communication means during training. Cell phones become the easy button. They deemphasize the importance of proper preparation and they become our instinctive safety net in moments of stress when critical thinking skills are most likely to be developed and tested.

Additionally, digital briefing tools should be kept to a minimum whenever possible. If we truly want to train like we fight, our garrison systems should be easily transferable to a field environment. If we create organizations that are solely dependent on digital media to create shared understanding, we are creating a vulnerability and missing a training opportunity. We are conditioning our formations to receive information in a particular manner in garrison and then changing to a more unfamiliar delivery method in the field. This detracts from shared understanding and overlooks the chance to practice with the most reliable, repeatable, and field-ready communications modes. To achieve the organizational competence required for success on the battlefield, we need to master our field systems. We must practice beyond the point of familiarity and become experts with the same equipment that we will use on the battlefield when preferred digital equipment has been denied, degraded or destroyed.

Read, Smartly

Many leaders routinely encourage reading in their formations, and rightfully so. Reading is a useful method for developing critical thinkers. It also expands our bank of professional knowledge directly impacting our competence and ability to solve problems. However, the

most common method we see employed in the Army is the publication of a reading list, which in many cases consists of lengthy books that would take weeks if not months to read and digest.

While commanders should be cognizant that long reading lists can intimidate and discourage Soldiers from engaging with new materials, this is less problematic than another common issue: reading individually and without discussion. By failing to contextualize what we have learned through reading, we are missing a valuable opportunity for enhanced development and battlefield application. Leaders should consider providing professional articles or selected portions of doctrine for reading, both individually and to accompany reading lists. This reading should be followed by group discussion or written reflection to maximize the effectiveness of the exercise. Selecting reading materials of appropriate length makes reading more realistic for the young officer or NCO who arrived at work at 0530, departed at 1800, went to their kid's soccer practice, ate dinner with the family, and put the kids to bed. As professionals we need to make time to read. However, there is no reason we cannot tailor our reading to the conditions of everyday life. Augmenting reading with deliberate conversation introduces us to new perspectives and cultivates our professional relationships. We begin to understand each other's thought processes more deeply. Such professional discussions also help develop the mutual trust between leaders necessary to effectively apply mission command.

Coach your Team

Many of us have participated in sports as an athlete or a coach yet the teaching and developmental methods we apply in sport are frequently left out during unit training. How often do we merely equip an evaluator with a task list or TE&O and send them to 'grade' a training unit, remaining silent until the event concludes only to finish with the obligatory "three ups and three downs." This is testing, not training.

We need to coach our teams. Leaders at all levels need to ensure we are providing valuable feedback and interacting during training to maximize every second of valuable training time. Additionally, a TE&O is not all encompassing as it does not account for critical thinking or creativity. Evaluators and senior leaders observing are professionally obligated to develop the training unit. To achieve this, they provide tips, ask substantive questions to understand thought processes, and set the tone for Soldiers involved to employ a [growth mindset](#). These are the things that impactful coaches do. We need to do this more often.

We know that future conflicts, regardless of scope and severity, will require Army leaders to operate in dynamic conditions of uncertainty. We see this play out routinely at large scale

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training environments such as our Combat Training Centers. We need to train for the worst possible conditions, not the conditions we hope to enjoy. Hoping for favorable conditions is not a strategy. However, critical and creative thinking both enables mission command doctrine and strengthens our entire strategic framework. Critical and creative thinking, irrespective of environment, will overcome our reliance on and preference for high functioning and convenient communications networks. By fostering creative communication and the confidence to prioritize critical information, we can minimize the risk and enhance our ability to make sound decisions faster than our enemies.

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