

Planning to Win the Tactical Level Fights: How Simple Operations Products Enable Synchronized Success



by Sean Leary

Battalion and brigade staffs operate somewhere in between the company tactical level and the operational machines that are division headquarters. In this area, it is essential for commanders and their supporting staffs to be trained and proficient in the development and production of five key warfighting products. These warfighting products allow commanders at all levels the flexibility to accomplish their assigned missions and meet their Commander's Intent. Common graphics, decision support templates, execution matrices, execution checklists, and target list worksheets allow commanders to better understand, visualize, describe, direct, lead and assess operations in time and space.

Simply stated, staffs that produce effective products for their commander and subordinate commands increase the unit's combat effectiveness and ability to execute command and control.

A warfighting product is a tool that aids in the accomplishment of a task. Outlined in ATP 6-0.5, [Command Post Organization and Operations](#), Appendix D, are several synchronization and decision making tools that can effectively "assist the commander and staff during execution." While ATP 6-0.5 focuses highly on staffs at Echelons Above Brigade (EAB), it describes in detail key tools that can be quickly created at brigade and battalion levels to promote synchronization and decision making. What makes a tool a warfighting product is the ability of a staff to disseminate these tools to subordinate commanders in a medium they can effectively fight with. For example, staffs in an Armored Brigade Combat Team (ABCT) may tailor their products for use on a Joint Battle Command Platform (JBC-P) to support

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their commanders and print products from their mobile command posts to enable product dissemination. On the opposite end of the spectrum, staffs in an Infantry Brigade Combat Team (IBCT) may utilize a more analog approach, such as hand drawn or hand copied products and pre-formatted templates. In all cases, commanders at echelon and their staffs should develop their Planning Standard Operating Procedures (PSOP) together and outline a section focused on their fighting products and how they are intended to be used.

Of all the tools, Common Graphics are the most essential and are required for each other tool to be used properly. They are at the core of mission orders and are critical to warfighting. [ADP 6-0](#), Mission Command: Command and Control of Army Forces, explains how graphics accompany mission orders and “provide enough control for those activities requiring synchronization, but they should avoid constraining subordinates’ freedom of action within their areas of operation (AO).” Disseminating these products widely to subordinate and higher headquarters ensures that effective communication is possible using a common geographical tool. Good common graphics must contain all essential graphic control measures for each Warfighting Function (WFF) to [conduct their mission](#) and “foster freedom of action, decision making, initiative, and reporting during operations.” Battalions and brigades use their common graphics to create a Common Operating Picture (COP) and enable their commanders to visualize operations within their Area of Interest (AOI). By using the common graphics as the base for the COP, staffs are able to quickly and effectively communicate current actions to their commanders at echelon. Without common graphics, units are required to construct more detailed reports and fragmentary orders to effect change and implement decisions during an operation. Staff must prioritize and complete common graphics to ensure all commanders maintain a common situational awareness for the mission.

During the Military Decision Making Process (MDMP), the creation of a Decision Support Template (DST) and or Matrix (DSM) is essential to maintain initiative, freedom of actions, and is a key tool for control for larger formations.

A [Decision Support Template](#) depicts a “combined intelligence and operations graphic based on the results of wargaming that depicts decision points, timelines associated with movement of forces, the flow of the operation, and other key items of information required to execute a specific friendly course of action”. A DST is used by commanders to assess a current friendly Course of Action (COA) against their anticipated enemy COA and inform execution decisions identified and planned for during MDMP. Additionally, a DST contains the DSM which is “[a written record](#) of a war-gamed course of action that describes decision points and associated actions at those decision points”. DSMs enable commanders to anticipate execution decisions prior to an operation and coordinate their unit’s actions up to

and through a decision point.

The DSM enables staffs and subordinate commanders to understand indicators in an enemy COA that will lead to the anticipated execution decisions. A DST provides commanders and staff the ability to visualize these execution decisions in time and space and acts as the initial point for identifying and planning adjustment decisions under the Rapid Decision-Making and Synchronization Process (RDSP) when threat and opportunity variances to the planned COA are identified. The DST and its associated DSM enable rapid execution of anticipated decisions and indications of variances to the current operation. The DST and DSM maintains unit initiative and enables unit flexibility through relaying anticipated decisions and their indicators to subordinate commanders and staffs.

Critical to the synchronization of any mission are a complete and accurate Execution Matrix (EXMAT) and Execution Checklist (EXCHECK). “An [Execution Matrix](#) is a visual representation of subordinate tasks in relationship to each other over time.” It helps commanders and staffs follow the progress of subordinate and adjacent units and is used to “control, synchronize, and [adjust operations](#) as required” (ADP 5-0). The execution matrix must span all WFFs within your AOI and include actions conducted by adjacent units and higher headquarters within your AOI.

A complete and detailed EXMAT provides a starting point for commanders and staffs to synchronize operations when conducting RDSP. Staff cells must update the EXMAT prior to operations and issue fragmentary orders to achieve the commander’s envisioned endstate.

Additionally, the EXCHECK “is a [distillation of the execution matrix](#) that list key actions sequentially, units responsible for the action, and an associated code word to quickly provide shared understanding among the commander, staff, and subordinate units on initiation or completion of the action.” By highlighting key actions sequentially, all commanders and staff following an operation are able to maintain situational awareness during execution.

The only WFF specific product that must be issued to commanders and Soldiers is the Target List Worksheet (TLWS). The TLWS is used to facilitate fire planning and is a simplified version of the [Fire Support Execution Checklist](#) . It is a preliminary list of targets and their descriptions that allow Soldiers to quickly reference and adjust planned fire support missions to the current situation on the ground. This product helps command posts to provide indirect fire support quickly and accurately during execution. Staffs should include TLWS details in all fighting products (i.e. using target numbers and descriptions in an EXMAT or EXCHECK and associated graphics) and must refine the TLWS when

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conducting RDSP.

Commanders and staffs who produce and use these tools are more effective at visualizing their operations and tracking their progress in both time and space.

Complete and simple tools set conditions for subordinate commander and staffs to apply disciplined initiative to meet their senior commander's intent. When opportunities and threats outside the planned COA are identified, these tools act as the foundation for creating adjustments through RDSP and enable flexibility to commanders and staffs to keep the operation headed toward the desired endstate. Equally, commanders and staffs must standardize and rehearse the minimum fighting products required for operations, the standard expected for each product's production, and the use of each product during the operations. Together, these tools enable commanders at echelon to understand, visualize, describe, direct, lead and assess operations in time and space.

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