By *Joel P. Gleason*

Road Trips & Staff Meetings

My wife and I have spent 20 years having the same discussion on road trips. As dinner approaches and the kids get hungry, we agree that we should stop at a restaurant but, as we drive past rows of options, I frequently find selecting food frustrating. I suggest the first restaurant, the second, the third, etc… With each option, my wife hesitates or declines.

When I finally ask, "Well, what kind of food do you want?" The answer often comes back, "I'll know it when I see it."

Perhaps we have all witnessed a staff meeting that looks oddly similar.

A leader's indecision often comes from being uncertain of what is up ahead. How do I know what I want if I do not know what is available? The decision is delayed by a lack of clarity or a knowledge gap about what is possible. Commanders are often faced with the same challenge.

To envision a desired future, leaders need clarity about what is possible. Intent-based leadership then requires commanders to share their vision. "A well-crafted commander's intent conveys a clear image of an operation's purpose and desired end state … [and] ensures shared understanding of what the commander wants."

But what if the commander does not know what they want?

The Problem with Blind Intent
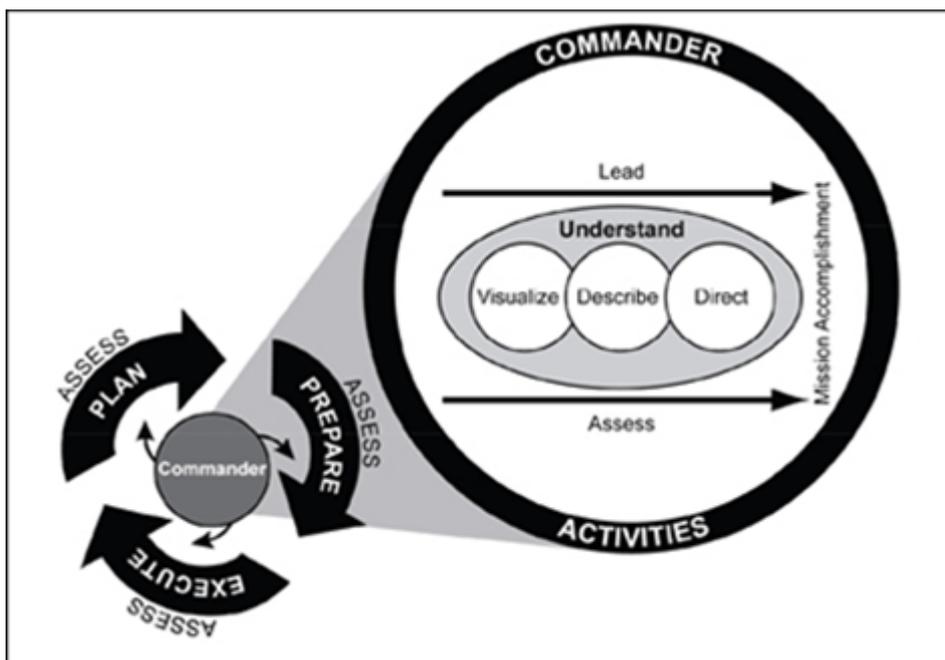
The commander's role in the operations process is to understand, visualize, describe, direct, lead, and assess (UVDDLA) the operation. A decision maker in any organization might use different terms, but the requirement to envision a desired future is the same. At times a leader may give ambiguous direction to their team that keeps them from moving forward because that leader has not yet understood or visualized well enough to describe the problem. A commander struggling to issue clear guidance may be suffering from blind intent.

The term *blind intent* describes guidance given with insufficient clarity to meet the leader's

intent. When commanders operate with blind intent, they are leaning on subordinates to produce solutions for a problem that they have failed to visualize. "I'll know it when I see it" is as frustrating to an organization as driving past restaurant after restaurant while increasingly growing hangry.

When leaders fail to recognize their own loss of vision, they communicate an expectation that, even though they do not know what they want, the staff will be able to clairvoyantly produce the desired solution. Blind intent is a poor substitute for guidance and can become a counterproductive leadership behavior. Saying only, "this isn't what I want," is guidance that sounds decisive yet remains unclear. It is counterproductive because the "not quite there yet" assessment is usually perceived as an unfair negative critique. Staff members that consistently work under unclear objectives become less likely to put in their full effort.

Blind intent becomes most counterproductive when it is a pattern. Teams that become focused on gaining approval no longer fully embrace the creative process. After a certain point of continued frustration, leaders run the risk of the "I'll know it when I see it" message eroding the trust the staff has in their guidance. At the very worst, a climate of uncertainty leads to burnout.

Seeing through Fog and across Distance

Contrary to what is stated above, it is acceptable for leaders to not have a clear vision. In fact, it is difficult to lead a large organization and not find moments where the fog is too thick to see through. The defining factor of blind intent is not that a leader is uncertain, but rather that they fail to provide clear guidance even when offered acceptable solutions. Acknowledging ongoing work and clarifying a way ahead, even if incomplete, does not constitute blind intent.

"Fog" could better be described as leading under unknown conditions. Emergent challenges, crisis situations, and hostile environments are all examples where it is not possible to fully forecast future requirements. Under these circumstances, commanders and staff members leverage various planning and intelligence methods to determine likely problems, solutions, and outcomes. Teams then prepare to execute based on what they know now. As long as the unknown conditions do not arise from a single individual or the commander's failure to trust expert team members, knowledge gaps are an expected part of operations.

Fog is not the only challenge to a commander's vision. Innovating new solutions or pushing the limits of training may mean that the objective is too distant to bring into focus. Often

great innovation requires exploring the adjacent possible or reaching towards undiscovered alternatives. These ideas are considered on a "distant horizon" because the team needs to formulate partial solutions before the whole concept becomes completely clear.

Having a vision that is not yet fully formed does not have to frustrate the staff. The question is what do leaders do when they recognize that their vision is lacking or incomplete? Do they issue guidance burdened with blind intent or offer instructions that free and encourage the team to help find the way?

Envisioning the Horizon: an Example

The simplest initial guidance I ever received led to the best training exercise I worked on as a plans officer. Between our morning run and the office, the 82nd Airborne Division Operations Officer (aka: the G3) asked me to look into "what kind of exercise we can build in Europe." He then directed me to brief the Deputy Commanding General for Interoperability (DCG-I) with some options.

The DCG-I, a British Brigadier, tasked me to develop an exercise that would make the division's training "demonstrably global." The vision included training with high-readiness international partners, readiness under unpredictable circumstances, and setting up this training to occur annually. He clarified that he needed me to help him develop an understanding of what was possible in a US formation. This was a vision of innovation.

There were multiple opportunities for the DCG-I, the G3, or another leader to look at my work and declare it, "not there yet." However, when I presented new ideas, even bad ideas, I was given guidance that moved us forward. As the project became a team planning activity, it became an iterative dialogue. It was clear that the vision was still forming, yet no one ever indicated that they would "know it when they saw it."

Because we were innovating, the staff maintained shared understanding with our leaders. We knew the gaps they needed us to fill. As lead planner, I received very open guidance with the freedom to operate, permission to experiment, adjustments when required, and multiple opportunities to seek guidance. Our leaders trusted the planning team, and set conditions for us to inform their vision.

The resulting exercise was Swift Response 2015, the first in an annual US Army Europe & Africa series. Swift Response continues to evolve as an allied airborne exercise, and enabled the 82nd Airborne Division's deployment to Eastern Europe in support of US European Command in 2022. That exercise started with a single sentence of purpose and direction

between the morning run and the office – unclear, yet perfectly clear. Our leaders had not finalized the vision, but they did not let that blind them.

Avoiding Vision Impairment

Stopping blind intent requires self awareness. When leaders listen to their own words as well as those of their team, when they are accessible, and when they are open to suggestions, forming a vision becomes a matter of time. Commanders who become aware that the staff are stagnating through unclear guidance, can begin movement towards a clear vision immediately.

Norman Dixon, author of the classic "On the Psychology of Military Incompetence," shows a pattern through historical examples in which bad leaders are risk averse and indecisive. Leaders who tell staff members that they are "not yet there" and they will "know it when they see it" may fit that pattern.

Multi-step decision making processes are purpose-built for enabling a commander's vision. (For 13 different military planning processes, see Appendix C of this Handbook). However, if the staff already presented a solution, use that outcome decisively. Adjustments are acceptable, but restarting complex processes with no new inputs leads to staff burnout.

Great leaders extend trust instead of viewing their team as a source of risks. Trusting subordinates when leaders have impaired vision represents a prudent risk. Leaders can save time and reduce their burden by extending trust. Trust allows leaders to follow expert advice despite their distance from the details.

When a leader's vision is unclear, iteration and accessibility become critical. Allow time and permission for the staff to candidly ask and answer questions in order to move the process forward. Commanders who find themselves not knowing what they want, may actually find they can better articulate the negative: what they do NOT want. Frame the way ahead by identifying its opposite. Open staff engagements feed the collective vision, overcoming blind intent.

Leaders who find themselves retracting phrases like, "I'll know it when I see it," need to own their role. Confirm or deny whether unclear guidance is causing the team to stall. Blind intent places task ownership on the commander to clarify before moving forward.

Clear Commander's Intent

At the heart of intent-based leadership, commanders issue "clear intent." If commanders

are able to clearly articulate what they want to accomplish, the rest will fall into place. Blind intent fouls this process, decreasing successful outcomes and increasing burnout. When leaders are uncertain of how to proceed, they can allow their team to feed their vision. It is possible to maintain forward momentum before fully envisioning a desired future, but commanders need to make sure they are not issuing blind intent.

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Thank you to my wife for being my best editor and for suggesting a lighthearted travel story to replace an ugly tale of counterproductive leadership behaviors. Joel P.

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