

The Art of Communications Planning

Sun Tzu and communicators

by Maj Brandon Newell

As the C-6 (Communications) Operations Officer and Deputy for Regional Command Southwest (RC(SW)) and Marine Expeditionary Brigade–Afghanistan (MEB–A), I was forced to reconcile my notions of who my true adversary was. It wasn't the Taliban. It wasn't terrorists. It wasn't the local populace. It wasn't the terrain. It wasn't goblins in the network. It wasn't power outages or Charms or Skittles. *It was the staff. It was my counterparts. It was everyone who is usually listed as "friendly forces" in the operations order.*

This article was written following my RC (SW) deployment. It is a "call to arms" for my fellow communicators—and all enablers—to proactively pursue victory rather than "waiting on requirements." This article utilizes Sun Tzu's philosophy as a framework for communicators to ensure the success of their unit and themselves.

As communicators, we need requirements; we need intent; we need timelines; we need tasking and orders. The truth is we never receive those things when we need them. Marines of all ranks hold onto their precious tactical flexibility until the "last safe moment." The "last safe moment" for a commander or an operations officer is not the same last safe moment for a communicator ... it's just not. We will never consciously be afforded the time we need to turn written intent and tasking into execution. A communicator must aggressively reach out and snatch/infer/assume/foretell what the

>Maj Newell, MEB-A C-6 (Communications) Deputy and Operations Officer, was responsible for planning and overseeing the execution of the complete disestablishment of the most robust tactical architecture in Marine Corps history aboard Camp Leatherneck. He developed a communications plan that provided reliable and redundant data and voice communications to the RC(SW) commander until the final hours of the last Marine to depart Helmand Province. Since returning from Afghanistan in October 2014, he has been the lead planner for I MEF G-6.

"If you know your enemy and you know yourself, you need not fear the results of a hundred battles. If you know yourself but not the enemy, for every victory gained you will also suffer a defeat. If you know neither the enemy nor yourself, you will succumb in every battle."

–Sun Tzu

commander's intent and tasking will and should be. To do this, the communicator must recognize that those staff members are not his "friendly forces"—they are the enemy.¹ They are the greatest external threat to the communicator's ability to accomplish his mission.

Let me be clear, the greatest risk to successful communications planning is always "yourself." Knowing yourself for a communicator means having technically competent Marines, creating an effective organizational structure, and being an effective leader. If you don't know yourself in these ways, your com-

munications planning will be doomed. This article is about what a communicator must do once he knows himself; he must "know the enemy" and then engage that enemy in "battle."

Know Your Enemy

You cannot shape the battlefield without knowing how to channel your enemy. You cannot channel your enemy without anticipating his moves. You cannot anticipate his moves without knowing how he thinks. You cannot know how he thinks without spying on him. You cannot spy on him without recognizing him.

To Know Your Enemy, You Must First Recognize Your Enemy.

A communicator must know his enemy, yet most of the time O602s identify the wrong thing. Most of the time, it feels like your enemy is made up of bits and bytes, radio waves, software configurations, or even sunspots. These things are not the enemy; they are simply your terrain. Your true adversaries are the commanders, operations officers, and fellow enablers as you await their decisions, their articulation of intent, and their requirements. Besides being your superiors, counterparts, and even subordinates, they are, more than anything, the greatest external threat to your ability to navigate the terrain of communications to meet your objective.

To Know Your Enemy, Study Your Enemy

“To know your enemy, you must become your enemy.” –Sun Tzu

You already know the basics of how the grunts, the artillerymen, and all the other ground force officers think. Here, you have an advantage. You attended The Basic School. There, you were like an “exchange student,” a student who was exposed firsthand to their culture. You know the tenants of maneuver warfare. You know about commander’s intent and tactical flexibility. You know about decisive action and critical vulnerabilities. You know the difference between tactical and operational. You were taught the basics of how the ground forces think; now ensure you apply what you know. If you’ve paid attention, you know more about their job than they do about yours.

To Know Your Enemy, Be a Spy Behind Enemy Lines

“It is only the enlightened ruler and the wise general who will use the highest intelligence of the army for the purposes of spying, and thereby achieve the greatest results.” –Sun Tzu

Everyone hates meetings. As enablers, you especially hate operations/planning meetings because you feel as though very little pertains to communications, making it a waste of your time. Most enablers daydream in these meetings



Communicators need intent, timelines, taskings, and orders. (Photo by Cpl Alejandro Pena.)

while they wait for a question to be thrown their way. They have failed to recognize their enemy. They are wasting their opportunities. These meetings afford you the opportunity to be a spy behind enemy lines.

In these meetings, study your fellow officers. Understand how they think. Recognize what is important to them. Infer a commander’s intent when none is given. Create requirements when none are provided. We as communicators cannot wait for clear guidance and written requirements. Wait at your own peril. If you study your adversary, he will give away the clues to this critical information.

Listen to the things they care about. Study their thought processes. Study how the commander’s and operations officer’s brains work. Are they methodical or intuitive? Are they disciplined in thought or haphazard? Decipher why they think the way they do.

To Know Your Enemy, Anticipate the Moves of Your Enemy

“Now the reason the enlightened prince and the wise general conquer their enemy whenever they move ... is foreknowledge.” –Sun Tzu

Now that you have recognized your adversary, studied him, and spied on him, you must take the next step. You must think like him. Apply what you

have learned of him and predict where he will go. Put yourself in his shoes. You must force yourself not to think like a communicator but think like a user. A communicator knows that NIPR (nonsecure Internet protocol router) is not mission critical. A user sees issues on NIPR and assumes there will be issues on SIPR (secure Internet protocol router). A communicator knows maintenance must be done on the network and services may be interrupted. A user doesn’t care and assumes communicators will do those things at night. The key is to figure out what is most important to your adversary and treat it as the “enemy’s strength.” Do not attack it, probe it, or go near it. Ensure the adversary feels most secure in that area and make sure your communications does not impact it.

Predict what type of communications is adequate in his mind for every scenario. If he needs network communications until the end of mission, then figure out a way to do it with minimal cost. Even if you know he can conduct his mission via radio. Don’t waste your time fighting against the things you know are most important to him.

If he is a poor decision maker or simply does not make decisions, then minimize the courses of action you put in front of him. Limit the details he is exposed to. This will require you to

choose a course of action that meets his needs. You cannot choose the correct strategy if you cannot anticipate his moves.

To Know Your Enemy, Discover How to Shape the Battlefield

“Secret operations are essential in war; upon them the army relies to make its every move.”—Sun Tzu

Shaping the battlefield for a communicator means shaping public perception. Does the commander and the rest of the staff believe you are operationally minded or communications blinded? Does he think you are aggressive and thorough or content and lack forethought? Does he see you as engaged or aloof? Does he think you can explain communications to non-communicators or do his eyes glaze over every time you speak?

Because he cannot see nor understand all you and your Marines do, everything hinges on his perception of you. If he trusts you to recognize and articulate vulnerabilities that affect him, he will not dismiss you when you speak up. If he has proof that you are operationally minded, he will trust your recommendations. Every interaction you have with him shapes his impression of you. His impression of you shapes his response to your every move. The key to shaping the battlefield and channeling your enemy as a communicator is ensuring the commander and staff trust you.

Fight The Battle

“All men can see these tactics whereby I conquer, but what none can see is the strategy out of which victory is evolved.”—Sun Tzu

Fighting the battle in the communications world is composed of three components: the development of your plan, the communication of your plan, and the execution of your plan. Unlike ground forces, the communicator's battle starts with the planning because the engagement with your adversary begins in the planning phase.

To Fight the Battle, You Must Be Bold and Decisive

“The quality decision is like the well-

timed swoop of a falcon which enables it to strike and destroy its victim.”—Sun Tzu

Do not allow yourself to be held hostage to commanders, operations officers, and planners. The communicator's success in battle hinges on the same tenets every officer is taught at The Basic School: decisiveness, boldness, speed, OODA (orientation, observation, decision, action) loop, and initiative. Now that you know your enemy and know yourself, you are well prepared to initiate the battle. Start with your knowledge of the enemy's intent and objectives. Boldly develop a plan that does not require his input by applying what you know of him. Develop a plan that gives you tactical flexibility in responding to his later decisions. Take the initiative to develop a plan before he ever expects one of you. Then you are the one in the staff meetings and planning sessions offering well-developed planning considerations and constraints. By being bold, decisive, and having initiative, you are able to shape the battlefield by shaping his view of the mission and the problem. This will allow you to have the faster OODA loop. Your adversary will be forced to respond to you.

To Fight the Battle, You Must Rehearse

“The general who wins the battle makes many calculations in his temple before the battle is fought. The general who loses makes but few calculations beforehand.”—Sun Tzu

One of the biggest pitfalls to a communicator's success is having the technical minutiae limit his understanding of his capabilities and his plan. It is not prudent for a communications officer to try to understand all the technical details under his charge ... there are too many, requiring too much expertise. That is why you have subject matter experts. However, the effective communicator ensures his “story” accounts for the most important technical considerations. That is only achieved through rehearsing.

When I returned from R&R (rest and recuperation), my Marines had played a prank on me by covering the walls of my office with dry erase boards.

To no one's surprise, I used every single inch of these boards. To a communicator, they are the equivalent of the grunt's terrain model. My Marines were always required to draw a depiction of what they were briefing me on. This serves two purposes. First, it helps the audience follow the details of what is being briefed. More importantly, it helps the officer ensure what he is hearing and seeing jives with the storyline he has created.

I use dry erase boards to test my knowledge of the architecture, to depict the tenets of my plan for scrutiny, and to construct and rehearse my briefings. Rehearsing and scrutinizing your own communications plan before you stand in front of the staff is critical. You must prevent oversights from derailing your storyline. The staff must walk away confident in your plans. The only way to do that is to pick apart your own plan before they have the chance to.

To Fight the Battle, You Must Engage

“And therefore those skilled in war bring the enemy to the field of battle and are not brought there by him.”—Sun Tzu

The true engagement with the enemy for a communicator is briefing the plan. Communicators must recognize that they choose the battlefield and dictate the terrain. Build a story that is rock solid. Predict the types of questions that will be asked. Answer those questions in your mind before the brief, not during it. Ensure your demeanor is calm, confident, and in control. Recognize the brief is really you sparring with your adversary. Your advantage is that your adversary does not fully know it.

I offer some Sun Tzu quotes to highlight my philosophy for this sparring.

“To fight and conquer in all your battles is not supreme excellence; supreme excellence consists of breaking the enemy's resistance without fighting.” The audience should not know you see them as your adversary. They should not know you are sparring with them. You have addressed all their needs. Your plan is operationally minded. It appears as though you are bending over backwards to meet their needs.



Headquarters elements need to stay in communication with forward deployed forces. (Photo by Cpl Alejandro Pena.)

“The art of war teaches us to rely not on the likelihood of the enemy’s not coming, but on our own readiness to receive him; not on the chance of his not attacking, but rather on the fact that we have made our position unassailable.” You hold the terrain. You structure the brief. You should never, I mean never, be caught off guard in your own brief. Lack of forethought will lead to your demise.

“Begin by seizing something which your opponent holds dear; then he will be amenable to your will. Rapidity is the essence of war: take advantage of the enemy’s unreadiness, make your way by unexpected routes, and attack unguarded spots.” You created this brief. You are prepared. The audience is not. Dictate the tempo. Channel them where you choose. The enemy didn’t choose the battlefield, you did!

“Move not unless you see an advantage; use not your troops unless there is something to be gained; fight not unless the position is critical. If it is to your advantage, make a forward move; if not, stay where you are.” “You can ensure the safety of your defense if you only hold positions that cannot be attacked.” Do not brief something unless you have a recommendation. Do not present a choice unless you have a desired result. Show discipline and restraint in your

answers, not rushing ahead blindly. For if you lack discipline, you will lose the advantage, and your adversary will dictate the tempo and the engagement.

“The clever combatant imposes his will on the enemy, but does not allow the enemy’s will to be imposed on him.” Don’t give the enemy courses of action when there are no reasonable alternatives. Do not show the adversary what can be done, show him only what must be done. Just because you can doesn’t mean you should. An adversary who thinks his choices are limited is easiest to channel. Now, some may think this is going too far. They argue that it is your job to support the commander by presenting every choice even if some are too risky or lack prudence. I disagree. You are paid to lead and be decisive, utilizing the experience that has prepared you for this position. The commander does not share that experience. He does not know the vulnerabilities to communications. You are not paid to blindly bend to his will. You are paid to provide him robust, reliable communications. If that means you take some imprudent choices off the table, then you must. At the same time, do not wield this power with hubris. Wield it only for the victory that is critical.

“Pretend inferiority and encourage his arrogance.” Get off your high horse.

Humble yourself. Recognize that communications is an enabling/supporting function. Infantry, artillery, air power—these are the foundation of the Corps. Being an enabler is not inferior, but you must recognize what drives operations. It is not communications. Do not fight that. Humble yourself, meet his needs, shape his opinions, and do it in such a way that he allows you to accomplish your mission.

“Do not interfere with an army that is returning home. When you surround an army, leave an outlet free. Do not press a desperate foe too hard.” Do not be obstinate in victory. Give your adversary graceful defeats even if it means slightly bending your plan when the costs are minimal. Remember you are most effective when your adversary does not see you as his adversary.

Conclusion

Success as a communications officer, as it is for every warfighter, hinges on knowing your enemy, knowing yourself, and then fighting the battle. Every warfighter has a different enemy, depending on where he is and what he does. For communicators, that enemy has too often been labeled as a friendly. If you make that mistake, you will be forced into developing a plan that is not prudent and accepts too much risk. As for fighting the battle, apply the principles of maneuver to shape your adversary and you will find that your sound communications plan will lead both of you to victory.

Note

1. First, I will use the words “enemy” and “adversary” interchangeably. As you will see, adversary is closer to my true meaning, but Sun Tzu’s focus on the enemy requires that I associate the two words. Secondly, never provide your adversary reason to believe or feel as though he is your adversary. To do so will ruin your advantage.

>Author’s Note: All quotes from Sun Tzu come from The Art of War, unless otherwise specified.

