

Fanning the Flames of Innovation

Thawing out the frozen middle

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“Above all let us kill everything stereotyped; otherwise it will kill us!”

—Capt Adolf Von Schell¹

The Marine Corps once again finds itself at the crossroads that will determine its future as either the Nation’s premier force-in-readiness or its downsizing into 21st century colonial infantry. But unlike previous assaults to our existence, we—as leaders of Marines—hold our own destiny in the palm of our hands, which enables us to go beyond our maximum potential by “fanning the flames of innovation” and melting the “frozen middle” that is content with the stereotyped thinking and tactics, techniques, and procedures (TTP) of yesteryear.

Innovation Defined

Webster’s Dictionary defines innovation as “a new idea, method, or device” or “the introduction of something new.”² This is as clear as it comes; however, over the past twenty years, it has come to mean a myriad of things—which is why we need to stop our march through the bush, pull out our lensatic compass, and take an azimuth check on these core definitions. Otherwise, we are destined to fall into “the institutionalized mindset trap” that continues to stifle creative thinking.

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Innovation in the form of the phalanx, cavalry, crossbows, gunpowder, firearms, repeating rifles, breech-loaded rifled artillery, the Napoleonic staff, small unit leadership, skirmishers, Huntington’s battalion, visual, sound, radio, radar and satellite communications, machine guns, the fire team, airplanes, tanks, mechanized combined arms, aircraft carriers, close air support, the School of Application, mission orders and tactics, amphibious operations, the integration of free-play exercises, the development of TTP and weapons systems, the Fleet Marine Force, the jet fighter, guided missiles, the helicopter, integrated supporting arms, computers, the MAGTF, electronic/cyber warfare, the MV-22, UAS/UCAS, network-centric command and control (C2), and distributed expeditionary operations in

the nuclear era were met with levels of resistance ranging from the insignificant to the irrational. But when combined with honest, aggressive, clear-headed, and pragmatic leadership, all of these heretical ideas proved to be effective in combat. The fact remains, however, that what worked well in the past does not always apply to the future. When nations forget that timeless adage, their soldiers walk into a slaughterhouse—just like the Ichiki Brigade at Alligator Creek, Guadalcanal on 20 to 21 August 1942.³

The frozen middle has existed since the beginning of time and, by its very nature, is reluctant to embrace innovation—whether that be a new concept, thing, procedure, or title—because it requires people to take risks which may or may not result in successfully accomplishing the mission. This creates an

“We fear failure in garrison but embrace innovation in a combat zone, but that is a result of the culture in the ‘Frozen Middle,’ which fears change.”

—LtGen Robert S. Walsh, Deputy Commandant, Combat Development & Integration, 2016⁴

archaic environment wherein we require our “young Turks,” both officer and enlisted, to adhere to high standards of performance and conduct, while simultaneously demanding that they submit to a level of mindless conformity and bureaucratic micromanagement. That is in direct conflict with the reasons they joined the Corps in the first place.

To further complicate things, the Corps’ resources are being limited to a level not seen since the mid-1970s—“war winding down, the budget knives out, and the Nation, although it continues to be supportive, is tired both mentally and fiscally of the cost of war.”⁵ This means that the need for innovative ideas, words, and actions will become increasingly intense; unless we have a plan to address the issues the future leadership is raising and other long-term problems we know are institutional, our young Turks are “not likely to be satisfied.” From the frozen middle’s⁶ perspective, that would suit them just fine, but the fact of the matter is that if we think we can simply go back to the “old Corps” pre-11 September 2001, and the bureaucracy is not tamed/changed/reformed, we will be sadly mistaken and dissatisfied with the results.”⁷

One might ask how we got ourselves into this problem? The answer is simple, far too many Marine leaders have forgotten the fact that “if you’re an officer, you’re here to fix stuff; if you’re a general or colonel, you’re here to facilitate those officers—just like a football coach.”⁸

Stifling Innovation

If we are to fan the flames of innovation and thaw the frozen middle, we must first be honest about the efficacy of our organizational ecosystem. We owe it to our country and Service to expose the flaws in the current institutional culture so that we can “locate, close with, and destroy” the extinguishing factors that emphatically smother innovation. If innovation is to be aflame, we must identify the systemic fallacies that overtly profess progression but covertly champion regression or the status quo.

First, the Marine Corps, like many large organizations, is rigidly hierarchical. This hierarchical system often affects the lens in which we look at other



Let the young Turks lead. (Photo by Cpl Arthur Shvartsberg.)

Marines and their capabilities. There is no need for a résumé or even a discussion because a Marine’s résumé is on his chest in the form of rank insignia, ribbons, and badges. Presuppositions and assumptions of innovative abilities based on rank and billet clash with the openmindedness needed to recognize the heat signature of a young spark. How many of us are surprised when a junior Marine speaks intelligently and articulates an “out of the box idea” that makes sense? Why are we surprised? How many of us are even paying attention? How many of us want to pay attention? Whether we like to admit it or not, many of our best and brightest-Marines are trading in their chevrons and bars for suits, only to come back as contracted consultants to tell us what we refused to listen to before. How much financial and talented human capital has to be lost to the blizzard of an antiquated paradigm before we change?

Second, we must come to terms that we are a hyper-risk averse organization. We aggressively advertise our successes and conversely aggressively underplay our failures. We expertly craft exercise briefs and initiative presentations as “groundbreaking” and risky with a confident swagger. However, the fact is, most of what we exercise is canned, scripted, simulated, and repetitive.

Groundbreaking initiatives are often nothing but the repackaged, safe initiatives of yesteryear. Risk in our current institutional context has been given “floaties” in the calm kiddie pools of the status quo. When you fan the flames of innovation, you must be prepared and willing to take risk and allow the flames to spread where they may. We must be willing to accept failure, learn from it, and move on.

Thirdly, we must recognize the dualistic, fickle, convoluted, and self-imposed bureaucracy we propagate in our institution. In combat, we support, encourage, and champion battlefield innovation. Cumbersome processes are streamlined, and bureaucracy is legally circumvented, all for the sake of the mission. However, when we arrive home and step off the plane or ship, dust off our boots, and assume our garrison fighting post, a frigid cold front of bureaucracy comes rushing in. Did our mission change? In a practical, environmental sense, it has changed; however, from a systemic, national security sense, it has not. The garrison environment is the icy wonderland of the frozen middle content with a never-ending process intent on holding stale ground, afraid to attack the hill. If we want to change, we must holistically embrace a war-time, dynamic mentality that transcends geographic bounds.

Lastly, we must realize that innovation is rarely—if ever—rewarded, and we need to change that. We must honestly ask, “Are we really a performance based intuition?” We pride ourselves in this despite having established deterministic career tracks. As long as a Marine has been assigned the right billets, attended the right schools, achieved the right physical scores, and done all of this in accordance to the subjective scorecard, he will most likely succeed.

Innovators are disruptive thinkers who challenge the status quo. They thrive in the chaos of the fire and shut down in the frozen walls of the predetermined igloos. If we want to fan the flames of innovation, the performance scorecard must change.

The Culture of Change

If the Marine Corps expects to remain relevant, all Marine leaders—from private to general—must foster a culture of change by returning to the days when the Corps was young and resurrecting the teacher/scholar relationship championed by the immortal MajGen John A. Lejuene.⁹ Furthermore, this culture must embrace the fact that our young Turks know that they are in a learning role and that a peacetime training atmosphere is one in which mistakes can be made and corrected without the consequences often imposed by war. Accordingly, seniors should be especially mindful of the need to be patient, to make allowances for error, to evaluate and explain, and to be reasonable and tactful in making corrections because “[bureaucratic] inertia and lack of aggressiveness are more reprehensible than mistakes or errors in judgment.”¹⁰

Finding Marines with good ideas is easy; the real challenge lies in developing an environment that nurtures the exchange of free thought and ideas without the fear of reprisal and that creates a streamlined dialogue with senior leadership. This requires leaders—at all levels—to recognize the fact that “knowing your Marines and looking out for their welfare”¹¹ includes the open sharing of ideas—even the ones that seem to define all logic (like replacing

“We need to look forward to the future and find aggressive solutions. This is why Marines who have good ideas need to be protected—because we need them in order to retain our operational advantage.”

—Gen Robert B. Neller,¹²

our M-1903 Springfield bolt-action rifles with M-1 Garand semi-automatics.)¹³

One Way to Fan the Flames

In accordance with CMC guidance,¹⁴ the Commanding Officer, Marine Corps Communication-Electronics School (CO, MCCES) formed a working/advisory group (W/AG) to fan

the flames of innovation and effectively thaw the frozen middle.

The W/AG is a handpicked, interdisciplinary, non-rank specific innovation team of the brightest personnel at MCCES. Its collective, vast breadth of experience in a wide range of occupational fields plan, advise, and ultimately contribute to solving the complex problems of enabling MAGTF C2 across the land, air, sea, space, cyber, and electromagnetic-spectrum domains (see Figure 1).

The W/AG Concept

- (1) Idea submitted the W/AG co-chairs for consideration.
- (2) Meetings are conducted to facilitate free thought and the open exchange of ideas without fear of reprisal.
- (3) The W/AG is given direct liaison authorization to reach out to the Operating Forces, Supporting Establishment, the DOD, and the joint Services.
- (4) The W/AG has a streamlined path to present ideas to leadership and to facilitate an open dialogue with leadership.

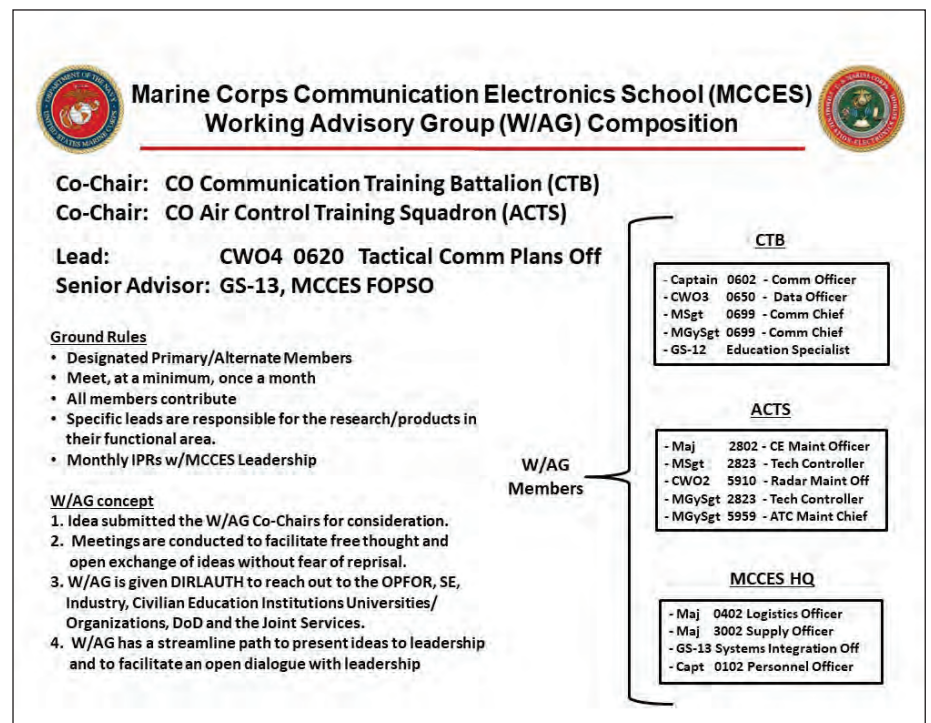




Figure 1.



Marine Corps Communication Electronics School (MCCES)
Working Advisory Group (W/AG) Initiatives



- **06xx Military Occupational Specialty (MOS) Force Modernization Plan (FMP) Support.**
- **MAGTF C2/Digital Interoperability TTP Development/CONOPS Planning Support for MAWTS-1, MCTOG, MCLOG and Infantry Officer Course.**
- **Realignment of training responsibilities within MCCES, to include how we can leverage both industry and existing DoD higher education institutions.**
- **Experimental Networks, Design and Planning.**
- **Exploration of vulnerabilities in Supervisory Control and Data Acquisition (SCADA) systems.**
- **Exploration of the transformation of Communications from a support role into an Offensive “Electronic Fires” capability.**

MAGTF - Marine Air-Ground task Force	C2 - Command and Control
MAWTS-1 - Marine Aviation Weapons and Tactics Squadron One	TTP - Tactics, Techniques and Procedures
MCTOG - Marine Corps Tactics and Operations Group	CONOPS - Concept of Operations
MCLOG - Marine Corps Logistics Operations Group	

Figure 2.

Since its formation in September 2015, the W/AG researched, examined, and reviewed a wide range of issues to include 06XX MOS force modernization plan support, the realignment of training responsibilities within MCCES, how to leverage both industry and existing DOD higher education institutions¹⁵ to modernize training, and the future application of a variety of new technologies in support of MAGTF C2/digital interoperability (see Figure 2).

Furthermore, the W/AG created a renaissance in professional thinking at MCCES because it is open to input from all members in the organization—from private to colonel, uniformed and civil service—and provides both the CO, MCCES and his higher headquarters (i.e., Training Command, Training & Education Command, and the Deputy Commandant, Combat Development & Integration) a dynamic, forward-thinking group of young Turks who provide frank and honest assessments on both internal and Service-level issues.

The Future

The flames of innovation will continue to exist as long as there are leaders who are willing to keep them

burning bright in order to thaw out, if not eliminate altogether, the frozen middle. The challenge is to develop a command climate that fosters critical thinking and accepts the fact that it's alright to take risks in both garrison and combat because, at the end of the day, it all boils down to the fact that time has come to listen to and guide our young Turks because they are the keepers of the future.

Notes

1. Capt Adolf Von Schell, *Battle Leadership*, (Quantico, VA: Marine Corps Association, 1987).
2. *Merriam Webster's Collegiate Dictionary*, (Springfield, MA: Merriam-Webster Incorporated, 1997).
3. During the Battle of Alligator Creek (also known as the Battle of the Tenaru), Colonel Kiyono Ichiki, Imperial Japanese Army, and his entire 900-man infantry brigade were annihilated when he led a frontal assault on prepared U.S. Marine positions, reinforced with tanks, heavy machine guns, and mortars during the evening of 20 to 21 August 1942 on Guadalcanal, Solomon Islands.
4. LtGen Robert S. Walsh, comment from the Marine Corps Warfighting Lab Force 2025 Symposium, (Quantico, VA: February 2016).

5. Gen Robert, B. Neller, *The Legacy of Belleau Wood: 100 Years of Making Marines and Winning Battles; An Anthology*, edited by Paul W. Westermeyer and Breanne Robertson, (Quantico, VA: U.S. Marine Corps History Division, May 2018).
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid.
8. Gen Robert, B. Neller, comment from the Marine Corps Warfighting Lab Force 2025 Symposium, (Quantico, VA, February 2016).
9. MajGen John A. Lejeune, *Marine Corps Manual*, (Washington, DC: 1920).
10. BGen Robert H. Barrow, "Job Satisfaction and Motivation," *Marine Corps Gazette*, (Quantico, VA: March 1981).
11. Headquarters Marine Corps, *MCWP 6-11, Leading Marines*, (Washington, DC: January 1995).
12. Gen Neller comment.
13. BGen F.P. Henderson, "The FMF: An Alternative Future and How To Get There," *Marine Corps Gazette*, (Quantico, VA: July 1971). In the late 1930s, when the M-1903s were beginning to be replaced by M-1s there were Marine Corps officers complaining that adopting the M-1 was a bad idea because the Marines would only waste ammunition in combat.
14. Gen Robert B. Neller, *FRAGO 01/2016: Advance to Contact*, (Online: 19 January 2016), available at <https://www.marforcom.marines.mil>. "We must continue to be ready for operations across the range of military operations (ROMO). At the same time, we recognize the current and future fight may not be what we experienced in the past. It will encompass not just the domains of land, air and sea, but also space and the cyber domain. It will include information operations and operations across the electromagnetic spectrum. It will involve rapidly changing and evolving technologies and concepts, which will force us to be more agile, flexible and adaptable. Most importantly, it will require Marines who are smart, fit, disciplined, resilient, and able to adapt to uncertainty and to the unknown."
15. Microsoft, Google, Defense Innovation Unit-Experimental, and the Naval Postgraduate School.

