

Leadership Before the Conflict

Developing your unit before you employ it

by LtCol Timothy O. Warren

The term military leadership often conjures images of noncommissioned officers directing their troops under barrages of fire or a ship's captain shouting orders amid the shattering decks of a man-of-war. These solid and steady personalities are needed amid the chaos that is combat. They "exert personal influence at decisive points" and "gain the trust and confidence of subordinates" through shared danger and privation.¹ However, that last-minute influence at decisive points should be the culminating effect of days, months, and years of organization, training, and education. Leaders at all levels must ensure their subordinates are technically capable of fulfilling their jobs during stressful evolutions; they must ensure that their precious manpower is organized so that no strength is ignored and that each of their troops is educated to make intelligent decisions that will achieve success independently. The leaders who tirelessly mold their units before conflict will repeatedly ensure success on the battlefield because their people will have the skills, positioning, and intellect to overcome many challenges.

Organization

Time and again, poorly organized groups with skilled people fail to achieve success. As such, leaders must establish their units before operations in such a way as to maximize the abilities of their subordinates. A good leader must thoroughly understand their unit's mission and capabilities from the outset if they intend to organize it for success. Put another way, a leader must know what job they must accomplish

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and what resources they need. Jim Collins tells us in his book *Good to Great* that organizations that excel have leaders who can break down goals and objectives into one concept. This concept is called the Hedgehog Concept—the book is excellent and explains the naming function in more detail—and has three parts: what are you deeply passionate about, what you can be the best in the world at, and what drives your economic engine?² Organizations that can successfully answer all three parts and make them work together usually make the leap from "Good to Great."³ Though this concept does not directly translate for military use, uniformed leaders can use it to guide their unit's organization and development.

First, a leader's passion must be achieving their mission through some means and then simply expressing that passion. For example, the commander of the USS *Decatur*, one of the most versatile ships in the Navy, can say that they are deeply passionate about the crew being well-drilled in handling all aspects of the ship.⁴ The well-drilled crew would then make the *Decatur* the world's most responsive and dynamic guided-missile destroyer. The commander's statement covers the first and second parts of the Hedge-

hog Concept while not getting into the finer points of command, and is simple enough to let the entire crew know that the commander's passion will result in them operating the best destroyer afloat. Determining the destroyer's economic engine is more challenging since profit margins per customer or day don't matter to a warship. In this case, the commander must determine the matrices demonstrating the unit's ability to achieve its mission. It may be the time to get a weapon system operational, its rounds on target, or something as easy as a consistently good command climate. But once leaders thoroughly understand their units' Hedgehog Concept, they can start organizing those units to achieve their desired readiness.

"The common feature among Navy, Marine Corps, and Coast Guard forces is the ability to task-organize for specific missions."⁵ How a commander organizes their personnel and equipment before operations is critical to their ability to employ the unit in any situation. Most units have prearranged structures that limit leaders' ability to adjust manning levels and assigned equipment. However, commanders have some latitude within those constraints on how to organize their units.

The book *Team of Teams* describes how the Joint Special Operations Task Force was reorganized in Iraq to become more adaptive and respond more quickly to ever-changing situations on the ground. The book explains that GEN Stanley McChrystal (commanding general) was passionate about achieving his mission in Iraq. He knew that his unit could be the best counter-terrorism unit in the world, and he assessed its economic engine to be the ability of his unit to act faster than the adversary.⁶ Through a restructuring that interconnected many subordinate units, the task force went from reacting too slowly to terrorist events to gaining an edge on many terror cells operating in Iraq. GEN McChrystal's reorganizations created effective communication flows between different subordinate units and allowed his front-line troops to thrive.

Organizing a unit does not have to be as grand as a flag officer reorganizing a multi-agency task force. Division officers can move personnel to different shifts based on their strengths and personalities, a company commander can request to purchase off-the-shelf equipment to enhance the company's effectiveness, or a department head can reorganize data flow within their department to ensure a more streamlined battle rhythm. However, effective organization is a critical step that all leaders must take before employing their units in an operational environment. An ill-organized unit will squander exceptional personnel, resulting in ineffective operational outcomes.⁷ An effective organization does not need to be complicated, but it requires a leader to know their unit's function, mission, and how to measure success.

Training

While a leader organizes their unit, they must also train their troops in the science and art of their primary jobs. A well-organized unit with a high level of training will breed exceptional results during operations—or as James Hornfischer put it in *Neptune's Inferno*: “A ship full of pilothouse philosophers, sailors' lieutenants, and colorful China hands who inspire great fiction will lose a fight in an eye's blink to a quick,

tight, fast-firing crew who snaps their weapons on target and delivers direct fire by the express route.”⁸ That “quick, tight, fast-firing” comes from training in the form of systems knowledge and drills. The leader who invests time in training their troops on their equipment's employment and maintenance

leaders must ensure their subordinates are trained to maintain their equipment in austere situations. There are countless examples throughout the history of warfare where unmaintained weapons malfunctioned in combat, and there are many more examples of when well-trained troops cleaned their

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will succeed when seconds matter and minutes are too late. Some leaders make the excuse that the daily battle rhythm is too much to find time for training, they trade future success in battle for present-day convenience. The leader is responsible for ensuring that their unit gets time to train on the finer points of their job and ensuring that the training has value.

Rather, it is launching an aircraft on strip alert or reloading a weapon during battle, continuous training, and constant drills that build the neural networks that allow humans to perform known tasks even in the most stressful situations.⁹ Leaders at all levels must enforce existing training standards to prevent the skipping of required repetitions that may seem mundane. These cyclical steps are critical to performing a task effectively when time may not allow for the thought of conducting the proper steps.

Additionally, learned habits such as reloading a magazine or removing a component must be revisited frequently to ensure efficiency. Becoming an expert in a field takes 10,000 hours of combined training and performance.¹⁰ Most troops will never gain that many hours in their primary fields, but the unit whose members are closer to that number will outperform, outthink, and outmaneuver similar units and will have a distinct advantage when it matters.

More is needed to perform the basics of a job in a stressful situation. Unit

gear even when exhausted to have those fully functional weapons work when needed. Additionally, equipment will break down during operations, and the well-trained units can get critical systems back into service to maintain tempo. A prime example of the importance of being able to repair equipment while underway is the USS *Yorktown*, whose highly effective crew was able to get the critically damaged carrier from the Coral Sea to Hawaii for an astonishing three-day repair (with a lot of shipyard assistance) and into the Battle of Midway.¹¹ At Midway, the *Yorktown's* crew again kept the ship fighting after taking an initial hit from an enemy raid, before finally being damaged beyond salvage. While a leader may have some time during the conduct of operations to fine-tune some aspects of training, the efforts beforehand will ensure that the unit can thoroughly perform its roles when time is of the utmost importance.

Education

BGen Forrest Poole encouraged the 2023–2024 Marine Corps Commandant's Fellows/War College students to change how they think, to take electives on subjects they know nothing about, because the Marine Corps needs them to think differently to win the next war.¹² LtGen Walter Piatt told a Hiring Our Heroes audience that “training prepares us for the expected; education prepares us for the unexpected.”¹³ Both

generals got to the heart of why leaders should push the education of their troops while training them for their primary jobs and organizing their units for the expected fight ahead.

No one knows for sure what the next armed conflict will bring with it, and no unit leader can guarantee that they will be able to have complete control over their subordinate units once the shooting starts. The best way to ensure the success of a unit's parts amid the unknown is to ensure that the subordinate leaders can think and make sound decisions with only their knowledge and the Commander's intent. Suppose a war with the People's Republic of China is in the future for the United States. In that case, the isolated company-grade and small-boat leaders deep within the weapons engagement zone will have to make educated decisions that will buy generals and admirals the critical time and data to make further decisions that will lead to strategic success.

The Services already mandate professional education for troops wishing to progress in their careers, but more is needed. Non-commissioned and petty

class schedules. Additionally, the Services provide several free programs like the Naval Community College and Air University's Online Master's Program that offer higher education with an additional mix of further military knowledge.¹⁴ With these resources, there is little reason why leaders should not encourage their units to further their educations the next war may depend on it.

Conclusion

Brave men and women are needed amid stressful events to be a steady influence amid the chaos and to make intelligent decisions quickly that will affect outcomes. However, the investments those leaders make within their organizations before the stress will bear the most fruit. Good leaders must know their unit's purpose and organize it accordingly. Those organizational efforts are critical to employing the highly trained troops within that unit, who will use their assigned equipment rapidly and accurately. Finally, when the chaos of war creeps in, the advanced education of junior leaders will allow

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officers need to take a vested interest in the professional military education of their troops while also encouraging off-duty reading and education. On the same note, officers and senior enlisted need to mandate additional education for their subordinate leaders. Further education teaches the most critical troops how to think and introduces new ideas and skills into the services that will help develop new doctrine from the ground up. There is a world of educational opportunities for service members. Many institutions offer a wide selection of educational programs that cost no more than the Service-allotted tuition assistance, and with very flexible

them to take their highly skilled small units and achieve mission success despite not having their higher leaders providing them with constant direction. During peacetime, many individuals can manage their units and progress. Still, those leaders who take the extra time and effort to mold their units will ensure the success of U.S. naval forces today, tomorrow, and into the future.

Notes

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2. Jim Collins, *Good to Great: Why Some Companies Make the Leap and Others Don't* (New York: Harper Business, 2001).

3. Ibid.

4. Staff, "USS Decatur (DDG 73): 'Bold and Daring,'" *Navy.mil*, n.d., <https://www.surfpac.navy.mil/Ships/USS-Decatur-DDG-73/About>.

5. Department of the Navy, *Naval Doctrine Publication 1* (Washington, DC: April 2020).

6. GEN Stanley McChrystal, *Team of Teams: New Rules of Engagement for a Complex World* (New York: Penguin, 2015).

7. John Hunter, "A Bad System Will Beat a Good Person Every Time," *The W. Edwards Deming Institute*, February 26, 2015.

8. James D. Hornfischer, *Neptune's Inferno: The U.S. Navy at Guadalcanal* (New York: Random House Publishing Group, 2011).

9. Staff, "Hebbian Learning," *The Decision Lab*, n.d., <https://thedecisionlab.com/reference-guide/neuroscience/hebbian-learning>.

10. Malcolm Gladwell, *Outliers: The Story of Success* (New York: Little, Brown, 2008).

11. David Lee Bergeron, "Fight for Survival: The Desperate Efforts of the USS *Yorktown's* Crew to Keep Their Carrier afloat at the battles of the Coral Sea and Midway Yielded Valuable Damage Control Lessons for the Navy," *Naval History Magazine* 33, No. 6. (2019).

12. BGen Forrest Poole, discussion with FY23-24 Commandant of the Marine Corps Fellows and Marine Corps War College students on July 27, 2023.

13. LtGen Walter Piatt, "2023 Hiring Our Heroes Awards Gala" (Speech, Washington, DC, November 15, 2023).

14. Staff, "About USNCC," *United States Naval Community College*, n.d., <https://www.usncc.edu/s/about>; and Staff, "Online Master's Degree Program," *Air University*, n.d., <https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/GCPME/OLMP>.



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