

Followership: Exercising Discretion

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Abstract

The U.S. Army has been fighting the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq for over 10 years and in the process produced a new military doctrine called mission command. Mission command doctrine was conceived from a wartime environment to allow followers in the field to act according to the dictates of the situation on the ground, giving them maximum discretion. The concept of mission command fits nicely into followership research and theory. For a military widely dispersed both by geography and mission, this concept represents an effective way to empower followers and encourage them to take initiative and accept prudent risk. Mission command doctrine expects officers and exemplary followers to be courageous. It requires them to act on their own, be wise in assuming risk, be actively engaged in executing the commander's intent, and find multiple ways and options to accomplish the mission. Since mission command is a philosophy born of our recent wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, the question remains of how this philosophy will fare in an inter-war period of forced reductions, downsizing, and substantial budget reductions.

Introduction

The U.S. Army has been fighting the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq for over 10 years and in the process produced a new military doctrine called mission command. This doctrine acknowledges one of Colin Powell's principles of leadership that "the commander in the field is always right and the rear echelon is wrong, unless proven otherwise" (Powell, n.d.). Mission command doctrine was conceived from a wartime environment to allow followers in the field to act according to the dictates of the situation on the ground, giving them maximum discretion. Discretion is defined as "the power or right to decide or act according to one's own judgment, freedom of judgment, or choice" (www.merriam-webster.com). Leaders determine the type of follower they have in their organization by how much discretion they give their subordinates and what their subordinates do with it. Leaders who are toxic or micromanage do not allow their followers discretion in their day-to-day activities.

The concept of mission command fits nicely into followership research and theory. Two recognized researchers on followership, Ira Chaleff, author of *The Courageous Follower*, and Dr. Robert Kelley, author of *The Power of Followership* wrote about concepts of followership that correspond well with mission command doctrine. In order to exercise mission command appropriately, commanders must embrace the principles of followership to succeed. It is yet to be seen how well a wartime doctrine which relies on giving followers discretion will fare in a garrison environment. The Army is currently transitioning to a more hierarchical and restrictive operation but one that is less discretionary.

MG Norman "Dutch" Cota from World War II is a great example of the effect of leadership on follower's discretion. During his assignment to the joint U.S.-British planning staff, Combined Operations Headquarters (COHQ), Cota was heavily involved in the planning

and preparation of Allied forces to make the amphibious assault at Normandy. He realized how chaotic the landings would be and came up with several recommendations, among which were to lighten the load of the soldiers and the division and to attack at night to take advantage of the confusion. Even though his recommendations were rejected, Cota's involvement in the two-week amphibious landing training for each regiment that made the assault at Normandy Beach identified him as an expert in amphibious assault operations. He was highly respected and chosen as an assistant division commander in the 29th Division for the invasion on D-day. He went ashore with the initial assault force, saw the expected chaos and confusion among the soldiers, and quickly took charge. He used a great amount of discretion and autonomy in leading and organizing the chaos to break through the German lines to complete the assault (McGeorge, 1990). Due to his leadership and valorous actions that day, he became the most decorated general in the U.S. Army at that time (Bradbeer, 2006).

Cota was shortly promoted to Major General and given command of the 28th Division, which was sent into the heavily defended Huertgen Forest. His commander, Lieutenant General (LTG) Gerow, was a former tactics instructor at Fort Leavenworth and considered himself an expert in doctrine and tactics. LTG Gerow gave Cota the plan that he wanted Cota to follow precisely in attacking the Germans in the Huertgen Forest. Cota attempted to object and exercise discretion, but he was given no latitude to alter the plan. LTG Gerow's commander, General Hodges, even placed one of his most trusted officers as Cota's assistant division commander to keep tabs on him. LTG Gerow also made Cota report every hour on the progress of the higher plan of HQ (Bradbeer, 2010). Cota's hands were operationally tied and he had little ability to exercise any discretion. The attack toward the Germans in the Huertgen Forest between November 2-14, 1944 failed miserably and Cota's division was decimated, having over 6,000

battle and non-battle casualties, which equated to over 40% of his total forces (Bradbeer, 2010). Cota's powerlessness to exercise any discretion seriously handicapped his ability to influence the outcome of the battle.

After the devastating battle, Cota's division received more replacement soldiers and leaders to fill the unit to full operational strength and was reassigned to the Ardennes Forest because it was estimated to be the quietest sector of the front. Unfortunately, this quiet sector happened to be the precise place the Germans chose to attack at the start of the Battle of the Bulge. During this timeframe, LTG Middleton became Cota's new commander and gave Cota a lot of discretion in how to fight by only giving him the admonition to hold at all costs and delay the Germans as much as possible. Cota's actions of one division against eight divisions of Germans delayed the attack enough for the Allies to win the battle (Miller, 1989). Cota had been given the discretion to use his forces as he saw best and was able to delay the Germans long enough for the 101st Airborne Division to get to Bastogne and buy precious time for Patton's armor to counterattack the German forces (Miller, 1989). Able to exercise discretion, Cota showed his true abilities as a commander.

Demetrious Ghikos (2013) defined mission command as "the Army's answer to the uncertainty, ambiguity, and fog of war and conflict" (p.23). Mission command may be the new U.S. Army doctrine, but it has been practiced by many successful commanders over past wars as seen by MG Cota's ability and inability to exercise discretion with two different commanders in the same campaign with two different results. In the *Army Doctrine and Training Publication* (ADRP) 6-0, the philosophy of mission command is defined as "the exercise of authority and direction by the commander using mission orders to enable disciplined initiative within the commander's intent to empower agile and adaptive leaders in the conduct of unified land

operation” (Department of the Army, 2012, p. 1-5). Mission Command is guided by six principles: 1) build cohesive teams through mutual trust, 2) create a shared understanding, 3) provide a clear commander’s intent, 4) exercise disciplined initiative, 5) use mission orders, and 6) accept prudent risk (Department of the Army, 2012, p. 2-1).

The last four principles are all directly related to allowing followers to exercise their discretion. Using commander’s intent focuses on the priorities that the commander wants accomplished, the end state, or desired results. It answers the why of the mission and allows for freedom of action and independent judgment or discretion (Department of the Army, 2012). The enemy always has a vote in combat by reacting to and countering the tactical and operational plans, which causes the plans to adapt and change. The commander on the ground knows what is supposed to be accomplished and uses their judgment in continuing the mission with the commander’s intent in mind. Telling followers to use initiative and take prudent risk is paramount to saying, “use your own judgment” and “make the best choice available” because the soldier on the ground probably has the best battlefield situational awareness of what is going on (Department of the Army, 2012, p. 2-4). Mission orders emphasize the results the leader wants to obtain, but not how to do it. The commander allows his subordinate to decide. Mission orders try to provide followers the largest amount of freedom to act in the best way to accomplish the missions. It is an attempt to give followers the maximum initiative and discretion that prevents micromanaging (Department of the Army, 2012, p. 2-4). In other words, all four of these principles allow followers to use their discretion to lead and make decisions.

Chaleff (2009) offers a model of courageous followership which emphasizes the need for followers to speak truth to power. His followership model is an effort to create conditions to make it straightforward for followers to be honest and for leaders to be considerate to what they

are being told by the follower (Chaleff, n.d.). Chaleff (2009) defines the courageous follower in five dimensions as one who has the courage to assume responsibility, the courage to support the leader, the courage to challenge, the courage to participate in transformation, and finally the courage to take moral action.

In the context of mission command and using discretion, Chaleff's first dimension of assuming responsibility ties together all six principles in mission command. To assume responsibility the follower needs to trust the leader just as the leader needs to trust his follower. For trust to be present there needs to be a common understanding through a clear commander's intent of the mission and what needs to be accomplished. To exercise initiative and assume prudent risk the follower has to assume full responsibility for the organization. Using mission orders assumes the followers will take responsibility as they fill in the gaps and work toward the desired end state. In combat, there are often situations where there are no orders, the orders no longer apply, or unforeseen circumstances and threats arise. In ADRP 6-0, it describes how successful commanders must rely on their followers to assume responsibility, to act, and to use their own judgment and discretion in ambiguous situations (Department of the Army, 2012). Chaleff's second dimension, the courage to support one's boss, is inherent in the principles of building teams through trust and creating a shared understanding. ADRP 6-0 summarizes that when subordinates believe their commanders trust their judgment, they are more willing to exercise initiative and therefore commanders delegate even more authority to those subordinates (Department of the Army, 2012). Creating shared understanding is the primary means for the leader to get their followers to vigorously project their message. This shared understanding is the basis for unity of effort within the force and for trust between leaders and led. It fosters the courage to support the leader.

The third and fifth dimensions of Chaleff (2009), the courage to challenge and to take moral action, are implied in the principles of gaining trust and creating a shared understanding. These principles foster both communication and dialogue to create openness and candor, which the Army desires. There are several factors in the Army that are at odds with trying to create this environment. As Chaleff states, it is normal for staffs to not have the courage to challenge their bosses, especially with leaders who have strong egos and passion for their vision. These leaders are prone to self-deception (Chaleff, 2009). The term challenge is not to be interpreted as challenging the leader's leadership, but the courage to challenge orders, policies or behaviors (I. Chaleff, personal communication, June 18, 2014). There are many current leaders in the Army that fit this description and do not support open communication and candor. COL Paul Paolozzi (2013) makes the case that there is a lack of candor in the Army due to its culture; this impacts the propensity of followers to challenge the leader. Without candor between a leader and a follower, followers will not challenge their boss nor feel they have the ability to exercise their discretion. Instead, they will try to hide things from their boss or only do minimally what they are told to accomplish. This negative climate in the organization prevents candor due to the leadership style of the boss. Neither of these outcomes are what the Army wants for its organization, leaders, or followers. The current competition between officers due to constrained promotion rates, the Army's "up or out" policy (promote or leave service), and in progress efforts to downsize the force greatly increases career risk, especially for those who would speak out or challenge their boss. Officers who have invested over ten years of their life in military service to their country will especially be reluctant to sacrifice their careers and possible retirements to challenge or to take moral action toward their boss. Even though every officer swears an oath to defend the Constitution of the United States of America and not to their leaders

or even to the President of the United States, there is still a pressure to conform or comply and not speak out.

The fourth dimension of Chaleff (2009) is the courage to participate in transformation of the leader and of self. Chaleff is not talking about transforming an organization or leading change in an organization, but transforming the leader who may have a serious fault or flaw which, in turn, can undermine or damage the organization. Chaleff stresses that followers must search for approaches that reach their leaders and methods to help them transform the damaging behavior. Chaleff also emphasizes that it is not just the leader who may have to transform, but also the follower who needs to examine his own role so that it does not become obsessive or manipulative. This courage is not covered in mission command directly, but indirectly the principle of gaining trust and fostering two-way communication helps in creating the openness and candor required for transformation of both the leader and follower.

Dr. Robert Kelley, one of the first published researchers on the subject, rates followers according to their ability to think critically and how engaged they are in the organization. The ideal follower is an independent critical thinker who is actively engaged and participates. Kelley (as cited in Taylor & Rosenbach, 1996) created a followership model that is a two-by-two matrix based on measures of critical thinking in the vertical axis and participation in the lower horizontal axis. In Kelley's model there are four identified quadrants with effective or exemplary followers filling the upper right quadrant, alienated followers filling the upper left quadrant, yes people filling in the lower right quadrant, and passive followers or sheep in the bottom left quadrant. Exemplary or effective followers are those who are high in critical thinking and participation in the organization while sheep are those followers who do not think for themselves and only do what they are told. Kelley (1992) makes the point that leaders often get

the type of follower they expect and according to how they treat their people. In a sense, the leader provides the environment for followers to fall into a certain quadrant. For example, micromanagers and toxic leaders tend to create sheep or they alienate their followers causing them not to participate in the organization. The last two quadrants in Kelley's matrix are alienated followers and conformist followers or yes people. Alienated followers are critical thinkers who have become disillusioned for some reason and do not take an active part in the organization. They may even try to sabotage the leader through stonewalling or behind the back criticism. The yes men are those who do not have the ability to be independent thinkers but are actively engaged in their work. They will do whatever they can within their abilities which are not very extensive. The fifth type of follower, which is not in a quadrant but is centered and moves between quadrants, is called a pragmatist. "They want to do a good job, but they are not willing to stick their necks out, or worse, to fail... Often it is a coping response to an unstable situation, either organizationally or politically" (Kelley, 1992, p. 117). An uncertain job environment due to reductions in the work force can create pragmatists.

Mission command doctrine expects officers to be exemplary followers. It requires them to act on their own initiative, accept prudent risk, be actively engaged in executing the commander's intent, and finding multiple ways and options to make it happen. Kelley (1992) characterizes exemplary followers as those who have a variety of skills that are both learnable and doable, implying the need for self-directed learning and achieving results. He divides them into three broad categories: job skills, organizational skills, and values.

Kelley describes the desirable job skills of exemplary followers as focus and commitment, competence, and initiative. The mission command value of exercising disciplined initiative is a direct parallel to Kelley's model. The other two areas are implied but not directly

spelled out. Mission command should instill focus and commitment by empowering followers and having them take ownership of the organization's mission. As the officer becomes responsible for the results of the organization, they tend to be more focused and committed since they are now on the blame line for the outcome or results. If the leader thinks the follower is incompetent, in all likelihood, he will not exercise mission command through empowering, but will instead micromanage the follower.

The organizational skills of exemplary followers deal with developing teams, networks, and relationships. The mission command principle of building cohesive teams through mutual trust includes all three of these organizational skills. The military works through teams and teams of teams, through coalitions with other nations, government agencies, nongovernmental agencies and sister services. Commanders start team building early, both inside and outside their organizations, and keep building it throughout operations. Effective commanders use interpersonal relationships to build teams within their own organizations and with other organizations that are crucial to their success. These other organizations are the military units, governmental and nongovernmental organizations, and parts of the private sector that Army forces plan, coordinate, synchronize, and integrate with during their operations (Department of the Army, 2012). The team building addressed here is heavily focused on networking and building relationships with other organizations and leaders. This idea of building networks is further reinforced in the mission command principle of creating a shared understanding because “effective commanders and staffs use collaboration and dialogue to create a shared understanding of the operational issues, concerns, and approaches to solving them” (Department of the Army, 2012, p. 2-2).

The last category of exemplary followers is values, which is how followers use courage in guiding their activities and relationships. It is their ability to make ethical decisions through courageous acts derived from their moral and ethical convictions, even under strong social pressure not to (Kelley, 1992). This category is not adequately addressed in mission command philosophy but is partially covered in the principle of creating a shared understanding. ADRP 6-0 explains that “through collaboration and dialogue, participants share information and perspectives, question assumptions, and exchange ideas to help create and maintain shared understanding, resolve potential misunderstandings, and assess the progress of operations” (Department of the Army, 2012, p. 2-2). However, this idea of values is not adequately covered in other Army doctrinal publications. The best explanation of the subject is in the Army’s capstone doctrinal publication ADP 1, *The Army*. It defines trust as “the core intangible needed by the Army inside and outside the profession...trust between all levels depends upon candor” (Department of the Army, 2012, p. 2-2). Paolozzi also opines that “candor in the Army has eroded through neglect; chiefly in training, education, counseling, and evaluations, effectively limiting the manner in which trust is reinforced” (Paolozzi, 2013, p. 13). He goes on to suggest that even though candor is nearly absent in Army doctrine, it can only be reinforced by doctrine (p. 13). This is one area regarding values where Army doctrine needs some additional emphasis. In an alternative argument, the downside of discretion can be seen as a normalization of deviance. This is a concept which Diane Vaughan identified in the *Challenger* disaster and defines as “the gradual process through which unacceptable practice or standards become acceptable. As the deviant behavior is repeated without catastrophic results, it becomes the social norm for the organization” (Vaughan, 1997, p. 82). This deviance is a tendency for organizations that are under time constraints, budget pressures, and other pressures to start taking shortcuts and

sacrificing safety. Over a period of time the shortcuts become the standard way of doing business and a foreseeable, often preventable result could occur. This phenomenon has also been seen in the *Columbia* disaster, the BP oil spill, the Chernobyl disaster, health care, and in combat. When followers are given full discretion they can start to take shortcuts, which endanger lives, violate safety regulations in flight standards, take shortcuts on combat checks, and in other areas where lives are at stake. There is a paradox because taking shortcuts in a crisis may kill people while not taking shortcuts in a crisis situation may mean people could die as well. In a dynamic environment of combat, standards can become outmoded and dangerous in which adaptive and agile leaders must continue to learn and improve.

The opposing operational leadership challenge is between following the letter of the law or using discretion to find a better way to operate. The Army has many standards where they do not allow deviance, such as in the physical fitness test standards, weapon marksmanship, and job certifications or height/weight restrictions. However, in an ambiguous and fluid environment of combat, some standards can quickly become outmoded and outlive their usefulness and effectiveness. For instance in trying to neutralize Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs), there were many different ways attempted to preserve lives and counteract the effects of IEDs. One commander decided to dismount his people and put them ahead of the armored vehicles to cut the wires to the IEDs. He took some prudent risk putting his people outside the armored vehicle but was able to prevent the IEDs from detonating. He only tried this for a couple of weeks since he knew the enemy would learn, adapt, and alter their tactics to counter what he was doing. This commander used his discretion to protect his people and did not follow the standard operating procedures. He took prudent risk and exercised initiative to solve a problem.

Since mission command is a philosophy born of our recent wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, the question remains of how this philosophy will fare in an inter-war period of forced reductions, downsizing, and substantial budget reductions? A garrison Army tends to be more rule-bound and less forgiving of any mistakes and creating a zero-defect climate. Discretion tends to be discouraged in favor of following the rules and full compliance. Without discretion we only have followers who become sheep, alienated, or conformist. Two of the principles of mission command, to exercise disciplined initiative and to accept prudent risk, become more difficult to accomplish in a rigid, unforgiving command environment. Mission command is still viable to create cohesive teams, a shared understanding, intent, and mission orders, but the implication is that there are no mistakes allowed, resulting in following the rules and regulations without deviation, suppressing initiative, and not taking risk. It becomes an environment where followers do not have candor, speak truth to power, or exercise any initiative to accomplish the mission. All soldiers in the Army are some form of follower throughout their military career. In many cases both leading and following roles are occurring at the same time because everyone has a boss to whom they report or for whom they work. Even the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff is a follower and supports his commander in chief, the President. The best way for a military widely dispersed both by geography as well as by mission is to empower their followers and encourage them to take initiative and accept prudent risk as guided by the commander's intent to accomplish the mission. After more than a decade of combat, the Army wrote and established Mission Command to be the best way for the Army to be successful in the future. This doctrine allows a maximum of discretion given to the follower in the field to operate as best they can in an uncertain and volatile environment. The question remains, will Mission Command be the best

way for an Army in garrison to operate or will the practicality of the new environment cause a zero defect, micromanagement attitude to become rampant in the force?

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