

Mission Command: Lies, Damned Lies, and Metrics

■ By Dr. Christopher R. Paparone and George L. Topic Jr.

In our past few columns, we discussed various aspects of mission command, particularly in the context of logistics. In this article we will discuss the issue of overreliance on metrics as a core tool for assessing readiness and overall effectiveness during operations.

Although we understand the importance of performance measurement, we believe logisticians need to recognize that metrics are essentially control measures that may conflict with key tenets of mission command—particularly the need to encourage disciplined initiative. The complexities of shaping military operations coupled with the tenets of mission command will continue to make the quantitative management style challenging.

The Rise and Fall of Strategic Planning, written by Henry Mintzberg in 1994, offers an extensive discussion of the challenges of metrics, strategic plans, and control in general. Here we present a small sampling of his ideas on the use of hard data. The content below is paraphrased from the book and some context is added.

Limited scope. Metrics are limited in scope, lacking the qualitative richness of understanding that a leader can gain by visiting operations and talking to those who work in the processes. Monitoring large-scale and complex supply chains through metrics may be akin to knowing what is happening in a soccer game by looking only at the scoreboard.

Missing complexities. In a military context, one of the most famous examples from history of the effect of missing complexities was when, in the 1960s, Defense Secretary Robert McNamara tried to measure victory

in the Vietnam War, missing important complexities, ambiguities, and interpretations of what was happening.

Over-aggregated data. Strategic control using macrolevel metrics is a theory worth criticizing. From a high-level headquarters perspective, data is often so aggregated that it becomes ineffective in helping to make strategic decisions. Small innovative changes in logistics processes can have amplified effects that cannot clearly register with macrolevel metrics.

Data timeliness. Data timeliness is a universal challenge; untimely data constitutes historical information that confounds decision-making and future requirements and capabilities projection. Even if data is accurate, which is not always a safe assumption, is it safe to assume a trend line will continue? One cannot forecast discontinuities, yet in complex environments, discontinuities may be the norm, not the exception.

False impressions. Like a doctor views blood pressure and the results of lab tests, we tend to think that our measures actually indicate the wellness of our purpose and mission, but this belief is arguably fallible. Significant amounts of quantitative data are unreliable, at worst giving the false impression of precision. This is illustrated by the old saying, “garbage in, garbage out,” when reporting activities and systems distort or invalidate the purpose of measurement.

Our principal concern is that using overly stratified or inappropriate metrics may actually over-control subordinate activities and stifle innovation and creativity. We recall a story from a senior officer who commanded a large distribution activity.

She complained that the metrics she was reporting to her higher headquarters no longer had meaning. She had redesigned receiving and shipping processes to the point that the old metrics made no sense and became an administrative burden.

The bureaucracy of the larger organization and its processes were so entrenched that she was powerless to alter the requirement to report the old metrics. Such red tape prohibits innovation and rather promotes mindless rule following.

We do not suggest doing away with metrics, as there is clearly a crucial role for well-designed data processing to monitor and assess performance. The challenge is to develop metrics and, perhaps more importantly, qualitative ways that convey intent and encourage innovation.

We leave you with this question in light of the mission command philosophy: How can we design performance assessments that empower and promote disciplined initiative central to the mission command philosophy? This is a daunting task to be sure, but the pursuit is essential to effective logistics readiness and support operations.

Dr. Christopher R. Paparone is the dean of the College of Professional and Continuing Education at the Army Logistics University at Fort Lee, Virginia.

George L. Topic Jr. is a retired Army colonel and the vice director for the Center for Joint and Strategic Logistics at the National Defense University at Fort McNair, District of Columbia.