

Mission Command: The Starfish and the Spider

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

The concept of mission command has been a significant area of discussion and doctrinal development across the Department of Defense in recent years. It is, in fact, a central precept that guides the development of Joint Force 2020 and serves as the philosophical base for a range of initiatives, programs, and concepts both within the services and in joint organizations.

We agree that mission command represents a crucial aspect of future military operations, and we have written a number of pieces in support of the overarching concept. That said, we feel that it is appropriate to talk about some of the limitations and challenges of a blanket implementation, particularly in the context of the joint logistics enterprise.

Throughout history, various aspects of mission command and a number of variants of the concept have been developed and practiced—often with great success. At times mission command became a de facto operating principle in military operations because of disruptions to communications, changing political decisions, and sheer chance.

Two antecedents of mission command are the German Wehrmacht concept of “Auftragstaktik,” used effectively in World War II, and more recently, organization theory, specifically open systems frameworks and their derivative—network organizational design.

In *The Starfish and the Spider*, Ori Brafman and Rod A. Beckstrom offer a concise yet compelling argument that circumstances call sometimes for “starfish,” or network organizations, and sometimes for “spiders,” or more traditional hierarchical organizations.

With the Army’s 2012 release of Army Doctrine Publication 6–0, Mission Command, the mission command

warfighting function has officially replaced command and control (C2). As logisticians, we should applaud the cultural mindset shift required by that change. We know that decentralized logistics teams, particularly those supporting widely distributed operations, must operate under mission command, which 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 operations.”

Our argument is that the Army perhaps went too far in its adaptation of mission command and should have expressed the concept along a continuum. One end of the continuum represents the ideal, tight, bureaucratic forms of C2 associated with spider organizations. The other represents the ideal organizational decentralization of mission command associated with starfish organizations.

Some organizational tasks have no room for error and the spider-style C2 is required. One example of such tasks is the financial accounting required for weapon system purchases in order to capture budgetary reports for Congress. Another is the supply chain management processes for nuclear ammunition distribution. For both, tight bureaucratic controls are generally considered a good thing.

Starfish, or mission command, organizational qualities make sense when logisticians are faced with novel and ever-morphing support situations. For example, when logisticians sought to open a northern supply route to Afghanistan, conforming to the red tape of the Defense Acquisition Regulation would have made it nearly impossible.

Logisticians in Afghanistan operate

along a continuum as they attempt to provide consistent logistics support for a mature theater of operations (primarily through traditional, tight C2) while improvising to adapt to changing conditions during complex retrograde operations (practicing more of the mission command philosophy).

Widely dispersed operational efforts in Africa and other places around the world are based on creative “disciplined initiative” approaches and are operated more on the mission command side of the continuum. Performance based logistics (PBL) in acquisition could be described as another example of emphasizing mission command to contractors, while the assured delivery of logistics at the right place and time and at an affordable price may call for more of a C2 approach to performance work statements.

We applaud the mission command concept but at the same time urge logistics training and education institutions and logistics senior leaders to be cautious in not thinking that the mission command (starfish) approach is always appropriate. Complex situations generally require that frame of mind. More stable and predictable situations may be handled with the more traditional C2 (spider) arrangement. Success is in knowing when to shift one way or another, depending on the circumstance.

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