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Mission Command vs. Cultural Change

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The warfare of the 21st century proved even more that, thanks to technical progress, quick and immediate decisions are needed in order to achieve military goals. Not only at higher level of command (strategic, operational level), but also at the level of subordinates (tactical level), there is a need for commanders, leaders who are aware of the higher command's goal even with a strategic goal, and are able to make immediate decisions in order to succeed the mission. Nowadays, there is no time to wait for decisions from superiors in front of an unforeseen obstacle, thus losing the initiative. However, this approach presupposes a high degree of trust, freedom of decision, movement and professional knowledge. In the current military culture, mission command is not yet widespread, as it requires a change of attitude compared to the rigid culture, which should be mastered during military education.

KEYWORDS: mission command, military culture, change, building trust

Küldetésalapú vezetés vs. szervezetikultúra-váltás

A 21. századi hadviselés bebizonyította, hogy köszönhetően a technikai fejlődésnek, gyors és azonnali döntésekre van szükség a kitűzött katonai célok elérése érdekében. Nem csak a magasabb parancsnokságok (stratégiai, hadműveleti) szintjén, hanem harcászati szinten is szükség van olyan vezetőkre, parancsnokokra, akik tisztában vannak az elérendő, akár a stratégia céllal is, és képesek azonnali döntést hozni a harcmezőn. Manapság nincs idő arra, hogy az előljáró döntésére várjunk egy előre nem látott akadály előtt, ezáltal elveszítve a kezdeményezést. Ez az új vezetési forma azonban nagyfokú bizalmat és szakmai tudást feltételez a beosztottak irányába, ezáltal nagyobb döntési és mozgási szabadság áll a rendelkezésükre. A jelenlegi katonai kultúrában a küldetésalapú vezetés még nem terjedt el, hiszen a merev struktúrához képest szemléletváltást igényel, amit már a katonai oktatás során kell és érdemes elsajátítani.

KULCSSZAVAK: küldetésalapú vezetés, katonai kultúra, változás, bizalom építése

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Introduction

“Mission command is 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.”¹

Mission Command (MC) is a style of military command, derived from the Prussian-pioneered mission-type tactics doctrine. The defeat of the Prussian army by Napoleon at Jena and Auerstedt (Germany, 1806), forced Prussian military leaders to review their doctrines. One of the most important observations they made was that the French leadership had let its junior officers use their initiative to make decisions at the time of critical battlefield situations. This resulted in rapid communication and high operational tempo.² Therefore, mission command promotes relatively decentralized command, freedom of action, and initiative, within certain constraints. Subordinates must understand the commander’s intent and then they can decide within their delegated freedom of action how best to achieve their mission.³ In addition, mission command was also present in the principles and methods of combat and fire control in the 20th century. Its content has been among the questions of leadership theory for centuries, even if the term ‘mission command’ was not in use. However, it should also be stressed that this may not always be the way to fight.

According to General Martin Dempsey’s white paper, the current and the future operational environments – which are volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous (VUCA) – demand the application of such mission command, and require rapid exploitation of opportunities and taking the initiative from all levels of military leaders. In order to implement the mission command concept at all levels of leadership, leaders must build trust within their organizations – namely, with their subordinates – and externally as well, with partners and/or supporters. A leader’s main task is to establish a climate of respect, honesty, and trust, which can empower subordinates.⁴

Perhaps the largest barrier preventing the full application of the mission command concept is the culture of a military organization in general. This culture is very hierarchical and perhaps too rigid to allow the requisite degree of freedom of movement and action of subordinates. In addition, changing a long-established culture takes longer than changing the climate of an organization, as existing walls and barriers have to be dismantled. In order to make significant changes within an organization, leaders have to take certain steps. In his book *Leading Change*, John P. Kotter established a method detailing how organizational change should be implemented. Even if it is neither a Bible nor a checklist, before implementing any significant change in an organization, it would be wise if senior leaders take his method into consideration. Doing so might have added value and could help avoid any regression.

1 U. S. Department of the Army, *Mission Command*, ADP 6-0, 1.

2 Stewart 2009, 4.

3 Stewart 2018, 5.

4 Dempsey 2012, 8.

Steps towards the change

First, leaders need to create a sense of urgency. A visible crisis might be very helpful to draw people's attention and increase the command's overall urgency level. The current security environment, globalization and its effect on national security, the VUCA environment and the future as described by General Dempsey are clear triggers for such a sense of urgency. This sense of urgency must hit not just subordinates or peers, but also senior leaders. Even if a sense of urgency is crucial to gain cooperation, a leader must convince key individuals (high level decision makers) to communicate the new vision and change.⁵ Communication is one of the key aspects to such a process, as different levels require different types of communication. Good communication promotes ideas and provides vision and strategic direction within one's own command and with other organizations (supporters, partners) as well, whereby a leader can garner resources and vital support.⁶

Regarding Hungary and therefore the Hungarian Defence Forces (HDF), the currently ongoing Russo–Ukrainian conflict serves as a catalyst and also as an example due to the fact that the current military force structure and the decision-making process do not necessarily meet the requirements of the recent era. The probability of a conventional armed conflict, where divisions are engaging, is quite low. The rise of hybrid warfare requires a major change in doctrines and decision-making processes. The age of old equipment and theories is over. There is a need for new, modern tools, equipment, and service members who handle them expertly. The Hungarian military leadership recognized this fact a few years ago and launched a large-scale modernization programme which has projected a new kind of approach. The requirement is that well-trained and highly dedicated personnel with a different mindset must use the new and modern military equipment. Moreover, based on the new equipment more effective operational procedures can be used, which also urge the MC implementation. There is no time for lengthy decision making on the battlefield affecting all of the different leadership levels, thereby wasting time. Therefore, the mission command concept must be applied at all levels.

The realization of a modern, effective Defence Force is also an expectation at political leadership level, which is supported by a large-scale budget increase. Thanks to this, internal and external communication is uniform, coming from top to bottom.

The next step is the creation of a guiding coalition, a team that includes key players with enough power, expertise, and experience making them considered as proven and credible leaders. This team must be based on trust and the common goals which they are then to communicate all the way down.⁷ The credibility of these leaders is vital in order to influence and convince subordinates, peers and partners about the necessity of the cultural change. Then the team has to develop a vision and strategy to achieve it. The vision has three roles: clarifying the general direction,

⁵ Kotter 1996, 37.

⁶ Galvin 2017, 1.

⁷ Galvin 2017, 59.

motivating people to take action, and coordinating the effort and action of different people.⁸ Without a clear, understandable vision or goal for an organization's member to follow, initiating a cultural change is pointless. That is why it has to be communicated from top to down as many times as possible to get common understanding.

In general, within an organization, credibility is critical in relation to the communication of organizational goals. The communication of the organization or the leadership is useless if what is expressed does not reflect reality. If the leader or the organization does not believe in what they communicate, then the members of the organization will not do so either. In the HDF, the mentoring of young, motivated officers and non-commissioned officers (NCOs) with sufficient professional knowledge ("Coaching and mentoring") over their entire career may therefore be of particular importance in the future. In addition, we must highlight the importance of foreign courses as one of the main cogwheels of the organization's internal change, both in terms of the development of expertise, interoperability, and achievable organizational goals.

When all of these preliminary steps are completed, leaders have to empower their subordinates to effect change. Sometimes it is also necessary to align the command and the personnel to the new vision.⁹ In the case of a military organization, structural alignment could create, abolish, or restructure units. Personnel alignment must include the necessary training. The mission command concept, for example, requires extensive education and training including not just for senior but for junior level officers as well. Training must reflect reality, as General Dempsey stated: "Training must replicate the distributed, chaotic, and uncertain nature of the expected operational environment."¹⁰

The mentioned processes can already be found within the HDF. Due to the requirements of the HDF leadership, including reducing bureaucracy and increasing warfighting strengths, new organization, units will be created, while others will be abolished or transformed. Organizations need leaders with appropriate competencies and professional knowledge, who enjoy the full trust of senior leadership, thus having greater freedom of movement. To this end it is important to start the above mentioned preparation and selection in time so that the right person can get the right position.

During the process, it is desirable to create short-term objectives or wins. Due to the fact that cultural change takes time, leaders must establish achievable goals for the near term in order to build credibility which can sustain the efforts of the staff and the subordinates. This may also help to placate the so called "nonbelievers", who usually want to see clear data or evidence indicating that the newly implemented changes and processes work. In addition, high-level decision makers who are providing the command with resources should also be able to clearly see that the funds spent and the energy consumed is not in vain.¹¹ Besides, short-term wins can

8 Galvin 2017, 71.

9 Galvin 2017, 113.

10 Dempsey 2012, 7.

11 Kotter 1996, 123.

provide leadership and its guiding staff reliable feedback about the legitimacy of their ideas and their strategy. Moreover, they also motivate subordinates and pave the way for success. As a downside, there is probably greater pressure on subordinates to achieve short-term goals, but at the same time, the strategy keeps the urgency level high. In the military environment or culture, such a short-term goal might be – changing the military education system or training regarding mission command concept starting at the senior level then later junior level and other ranks. Although these short-term wins could help achieve the command's desired end state, declaring final victory too early might cause the command to regress. This is due to the fact that the changes were not absorbed completely and they did not get internalised sufficiently enough by the organization.¹²

Regarding the changing of military education or training system, within the HDF it would be worthwhile to introduce the so-called "GAMING approach." Nowadays, young people, thanks to computer and mobile phone games, are used to "levelling up" after a certain amount of time, which comes with a reward. (In case of games, this is a sound and light effect...just as gambling machines work, Pavlov effect, etc.) This can also be introduced in the training of the armed forces. The levelling of the different types of training could be reconsidered in order to avoid a big gap between the current ability and the expected level of training because it can easily demotivate the soldier. Young generation has a need for positive feedback and a sense of success after the invested energy. For example, regarding physical training tests, the current physical state of given individuals must be assessed and the difference in the number of repetitions required for the maximum score could be broken down and tied to a deadline. Overall, the military could have more motivated soldiers in many areas if they felt that the set goals seemed achievable. It also raises the important question of how to reward a soldier after reaching the set level. Possible solutions are: financial benefit, sincere appreciation (it only has a value if the person feels that they really had to work for it, if the recognition is authentic and realistic).

Another way of appreciation is the establishment of a points system. For example, the British Armed Forces keep track of the days soldiers spent on the training field or mission and after reaching a certain number they receive an additional "X" amount to their salary. If this number reaches 2X, the amount increases again, further motivating them to go on exercise, missions, etc.

The development and distribution of various VR simulators within the Hungarian Defence Forces would also increase both the motivation and the training levels. In addition, these systems could not only be used among active military personnel, they should be also available to military schools, other military facilities, or even sports associations. The most important thing is to address young people as soon as possible in order to get those who are susceptible to military profession. A very good example of this is the patriotic education, carried out by the HDF in high schools, which could develop the self- or internal motivation of students.

After short term wins, the next step is to consolidate gains, because "until changed practices attain a new equilibrium and have been driven into the culture,

¹² Kotter 1996, 13.

they can be very fragile.”¹³ Those consolidated gains might create new changes to be implemented, because the current organizational structures and policies do not fit together or there is no alignment with the command’s vision. This is also the time to promote or develop¹⁴ subordinates. The final step is anchoring changes decisively in the culture.

To anchor the changes is probably the most difficult part of the process, because the old culture is rarely compatible with the new vision and usually effects the core of the culture as well. Shared values and norms representing the organization are cornerstones of a culture and typically remain constant; therefore a new culture might need new people as well. Especially in the military, those who have been serving for a long time within a culture that has not changed throughout the years have a hard time accepting significant change. If the aforementioned intransigent people are senior leaders, achieving the desired end state is almost unfeasible. Therefore, “cultural change comes last,”¹⁵ as Kotter states in his book. Usually, a culture changes easier after members of the organization have some kind of reward or as they can see a clear association between the new vision and procedures and the organization’s development. It is important to note that people’s attitude and behaviours could change at the beginning of the process which can create new practices, but it is only at the end of the process when such changes become anchored in the command’s culture.¹⁶ According to Kotter, “...anchoring change in a culture comes last, not first; depends on results; requires a lot of talk; may involve turnover and makes decisions on succession crucial.”¹⁷

Conclusion

In conclusion, implementing the mission command concept requires time because it changes an organization’s culture from its roots. In the military, which has a long tradition and performs its tasks under strict rules and within a rigid framework, implementing such a concept will likely take even longer. Leaders must understand the necessity of such a change and embody the view that the challenges of the future require a new organizational culture. The mission command concept not only gives a greater flexibility to military leaders but also results in greater responsibility. They often have to rely on themselves and their direct staff to make their own decisions, which naturally carries the possibility of mistakes. That is why it is vital to build trust within the organization by way of example. It is also important for the concept to appear in military education and training in order to prepare future military leaders. For example, when selecting leaders, it is necessary to take into account whether they are capable of independent decision making. Determining this is not an easy task. However, if the decision-making processes are emphasized in officer and NCOs

13 Kotter 1996, 139.

14 Kotter 1996, 164.

15 Ibid.

16 Kotter 1996, 165.

17 Ibid., 166.

schools or training courses, and the potential candidates for higher leadership positions are continuously tested/made compete during their active careers, there is a chance to identify prospective good leaders. It may also become necessary to reform the control system. It is not the soldiers' performance but the orders and activities of their commanders that needs to be checked.

Besides, the method outlined by Kotter allows for a smooth transition if senior leaders are behind the concept and promote it with full vigour. They must understand that micromanagement does not work. They need to give direction and guidance regarding WHAT, WHEN, WHERE and WHY for their subordinate commanders not the HOW. The Commander's intent part of the tasking must be so clear and understandable that it can be understood even two levels down.

Furthermore, an organizational change can only be implemented by military leaders brought up in a different mentality, for which it is extremely important that they maintain that mentality throughout their military career. If a talented and motivated young officer is constantly "managed", motivated and mentored, he/she will train his/her subordinates in the same manner. Therefore, sooner or later the organization reaches the point where the mentality of the organization would change at all levels. While this is an extremely long and time-consuming process, radical changes could only be achieved with drastic methods and an autocratic leadership style. In the author's opinion, it is possible to achieve changes more effectively in an organization if attempts are made to change the areas that need to be improved, from several directions, and at the same time. For this, there is a need for an organization that is capable of (honestly) identifying its weaknesses and areas for improvement.

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