

Mission Command is neither Technical nor Methodical – It's Cultural

Introduction

Mission command enables a commander to make decisions according to his judgment of place, time, and situation. This is possible when his commanders support and assist him in implementing his decisions.

The origin of the idea can be traced to Frederick the Great in the eighteenth century where it evolved in the German High Command and spread to Western armies and the Israel Defense Forces (henceforth: IDF).

The idea looks fine on paper, but in reality armies found it difficult to apply because it demanded pre-conditions and special skills.

Mission command becomes even more complex as the information revolution enters areas that affect the commander, military intelligence, command and control (C2), and the generally top to bottom integration of fighting systems.

The command level knows, sees, and hears more, intervenes, and "rides on the back" of the junior commander. Changes in the fighting environment contribute to the constriction of the commander's freedom in decisionmaking, while legal advisors, the ubiquitous media, the urban setting, and the involvement of non-combatants produce mental and physical strain that impede the commander's ability to take independent initiative and be free from the pressure of the headquarters above him.

An inherent conflict exists between information and authority. On the one hand, the Internet, information circulation, and the surfeit of information on all levels enable the commander to make decisions that

are less dependent on data coming in from the hierarchical channels. On the other hand, the headquarters above him knows more than he does, including his situation, and wants to augment its influence. The battle's margins have expanded, the collapse of hierarchy brings the strategic level down to the tactical level, and innumerable factors are now appended to the tactical level that influence a junior commander's judgment and actions far beyond his abilities to cope with them.

The preparation for integrated combat leads to a desire to control events at the integration level, which is usually directed at the level above the junior commander. Integration has its advantages and limitations. It demands subordination and the coordination of constraints and conditions.

Despite the enticing language in the field manuals, the commander's freedom to decide and act has been technically and operationally narrowed. He is pressured to the point of being forced to defer to his commanders. He fears taking the initiative. New systems have made him dependent on intelligence and fire provided by hierarchies that he has no control over. He must request support. He feels that his C2 systems are penetrated by external monitoring systems. He is transparent and exposed to both effective and hostile criticism. Commanders are forced to audiotape and videotape their actions not only to derive lessons from them but mainly to use them as legal evidence in court.

In the not too distant past, basic training strove to "mold" a new person, to erase his citizen identity and transform him into a disciplined soldier, an obedient machine willing to internalize uniformity and sacrifice his life.

From here came the functional idea – mission command – that is not supported by the system it is supposed to serve.

The idea of a mission command sounds correct and rings true.

From the army's point of view, building an organizational system that takes full advantage of modern technologies enables the commander to apply his skills and abilities optimally. The system intervenes only in extreme cases, such as thwarting a catastrophe or exploiting a success.

In the heat of battle, the plans and all support, assistance, and C2 systems stand firm until the enemy begins to respond and makes the first deviation. From this point on everything enters another system, one in which the commander assesses the situation and decides how to exploit the surrounding influences (combat or otherwise) to the best of his ability. The constraints and their results (combat and legal) that he has to cope with are evaluated at the end of the battle. The commander must proceed with mission command despite the limitations, constraints, and stipulations that the command level forces on him, whether in the plans, organization, force structure, or combat doctrine. An unseen struggle ensues between the officer or soldier and the framework in which both parties strive towards the same goal and compete for ways to achieve it.

Few commanders bear up under this pressure. It is easier to fail in a mission that you are ordered to carry out than to fail in one that you initiate. Few are willing to take the risk.

Since the army is aware that the implementation of the idea has not succeeded, it is developing decisionmaking techniques primarily aimed at assisting the average commander acquire and apply this ability. But this too has not been working well.

In the IDF, as in other armies, a contradiction exists between the idea and the system when the system tells the junior officer "take the initiative, use your better judgment," and then sits back and oversees events. Still, mission command is more prevalent in the IDF than in other armies even though its drawbacks are similar.

The IDF

Here culture enters the picture. Culture comes from the home. The military culture acquired in the army (the IDF) is younger, functional, mission-oriented, and does not perceive military values as ends in themselves but is supported by personal and human values.

Mission command consists of many qualities and skills embedded in the personality of the decision-maker and the system that encompasses him.

Flexibility, insight, inter-human communication, personal example, initiative, improvisation, moral courage, group responsibility, mutual assistance, calculated risk, self-confidence, faith in the system, flexible organization, common language, shared doctrine, professionalism, all of which when taken separately or together and balanced in a given situation, create a cultural envelope for the commander, most of which emanates from the home and the formal and informal educational systems that enable mission command to be realized.

Despite the plethora of words on the importance mission command, the IDF is still reluctant to view mistakes and errors as a kind of "tuition fee." Given the operational pressure of the C2 systems and the top-to-bottom information, the commander finds himself dangling on the end of

a noose in a puppet show. Legal pressures stymie a tactical commander from taking audacious initiatives that deviate from the original plan due to his apprehension of a military or criminal trial when the battle is over. The military organization's control from above of infantry, armor, combat engineers, and combat intelligence by means of fire, intelligence, air and logistical support puts the commander inside a pressure cooker.

Nevertheless, when the IDF was engaged in combat mission command suddenly became a way of life, not because of the fighting doctrine, but because of a deeply rooted culture that developed far away from the battlefield, in the struggle for everyday survival, in the little victories against giant threats, and in the Jewish culture that evolved under the pressure of the nations it lived among. This is a culture that appears in every struggle and in every field of endeavor – social, cultural, economic and military. It is an integral part of our way of coping with threats and dangers and surviving.

The national culture (a nation without a country, army, territory, or government)

For over two thousand years the Jewish people lacked a solid base it could call its own. Its personal and collective survival depended on improvisation, on finding or creating cracks and niches inside choking threatening systems, on the need to develop faster and beat the "hosts" in acquiring crucial skills that guaranteed survival and even prosperity and success. In other words, the Jewish people had to overcome its hosts non-violently and in ways that did not provoke violence.

Its weapon was the book – the Bible - around which revolved the people and community life. The Bible was cherished. It cannot be stolen,

conquered or destroyed because it is not physical property. It is the storehouse of knowledge and wisdom. Empires rose and fell, nations flourished and disappeared, and the Jew and Bible remained and grew stronger. Why?

Its words endured unchanged for thousands of years. They are read and heeded every day, yet the Jew does not deal with the words, but with their meaning. He is not satisfied with their content but with their interpretation; not the lines themselves but what lies between the lines. Many cultures have sought to emulate the accomplishments of their founding fathers and intellectual giants, but in Jewish culture, "the pupil will rise above his teacher" is the rule. The pride of the teacher is the pupil who is wiser than him.

The wisdom lies in devising new interpretations, in reading between the lines rather than reciting from memory. Even today in literature and poetry lessons, the question always asked, starting in the first grade is "what does the author mean?"

During the centuries that Jewish culture remained stateless and without an army, the emphasis was always on the personal story and its values: David and Goliath; Samson the individual, the leader, who went out to fight the Philistines; Gideon ben Yoash who selected three hundred warriors and personally led them against the Midianites; the story of Masada, the last battle of the Jewish rebels against the Roman Empire; the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans in 70 A.D. because of fraternal dissension and internecine fighting. In all of these epochs Jewish culture stressed the individual, the personal example, the prophet who chastised the ruler. These were inviolable, indelible values. In Jewish culture personal example is the narrative, whether it exemplifies success

or failure, it is always about the individual, about people, without any courtly protocol or regal adoration.

On the organizational side, Jewish society is classless. Everyone is equal before God; everyone has the right to speak. The rabbi is not God's representative on earth. At most he is an interpreter or an intermediary. Every person faces God alone.

Cultural values in the regular military framework

A rookie officer who assumes command naturally seeks to improve upon his predecessor by developing a novel idea or innovation and accomplish more with what he has at his disposal.

When cadets go through officers' training school, no one has an advantage over his comrades. Every recruit begins at the bottom and goes through the same training program and operational posting. The best are selected for a commander's course, and the best among them go on to an officers' training course. When the officer returns to his unit he has been through all the roles that he has to command and has excelled in all of them. His men rely on him and trust him because of his proven ability. But this is not enough. Training provides an officer with knowledge and rank; and with rank comes responsibility, but authority must be acquired, and authority is earned by personal example, professionalism, and concern for one's men. When a tank crew is being drilled, the first crew to demonstrate the maneuver is the company commander's with the company commander at the head. The entire company observes how the maneuver is carried out.

A tactical combat doctrine based on reducing the strain of decision-making through frequently practiced drills and combat techniques frees the commander from dealing with them during battle. Tank 1 takes the lead in the center; 1A is always to the right, 1B to the left, and the commander has absolute faith in the crews that they will do their best so that he can concentrate on the mission.

The IDF was founded on three underground organizations – the Hagana, Etzel and Lechi, in each of which rank and discipline were different from that in a regular army. A differentiation also existed, if not formalized, between operational discipline (conduct on a mission) and organizational discipline (spit and polish). The IDF came into being in the midst of the War of Independence. One of Prime Minister-Defense Minister Ben-Gurion's first steps was to dismantle the underground groups and establish an army with an infrastructure made up of veterans of the Jewish Brigade Group that had served in the British Army in the Second World War. The formation of the IDF was a complex ordeal, beginning with the order to establish it on May 31, 1948, and ending in November 1948 with the disbanding of the Palmach. But the underground spirit lingered on in the IDF for long time.

In response to growing infiltration in 1951-1953, the IDF ordered the regular army brigades to carry out retaliatory raids beyond the armistice lines. All of these operations (Beit Tzurif, Biddu, Wadi Fukin, Tzurif and Idhna, for example) ended in failure. In the wake of continuous blundering, Michel Shaham proposed the establishment of a special unit, later to become the famous Unit 101, skilled and trained in executing special operations behind enemy lines. In a General Staff meeting, Moshe Dayan, the chief of the Operations Branch of the General Staff, rejected the proposal. Undaunted, Shaham tried to set up the unit within the

framework of the 16th Brigade. Leading it was Ariel Sharon, a reserve officer who was studying history at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem. Major Shmulik Matot and Captain Yehuda Piamenta from the brigade staff volunteered for the unit. Sharon brought in Shlomo Baum, a reserve soldier from the Jezreel Valley, and a few others, altogether seven men, most of them officers. The unit's first operation was in the Arab village of Nabi Samuel, and it ended in a resounding failure.

After this, Shaham realized the need for a highly trained commando unit. He renewed his efforts to establish a special unit and approached the chief of staff, Lieutenant General Mordechai Maklef, and Defense Minister Ben-Gurion. Ben-Gurion ordered the General Staff to review the proposal and approve it. The General Staff assigned the task of setting up the unit to Michel Shaham. This was the beginning of Unit 101 and the start of an operational revolution in the IDF. The unit was soon transferred to the Airborne Brigade.

The question of discipline in the paratroopers was a running dispute between IDF officers with a British Army background who prized **external discipline** and the men in Unit 101 who attested to the superiority of **operational discipline**. During the 1950s the paratroopers preferred operational discipline.

Parallel with this, a school of thought developed among commanders that the paratroopers, who were part of the IDF, had to come under the same military discipline that applied to the rest of the army according to General Staff orders. Although the General Staff came up with various compromises, the ideological differences between the two schools persisted. In one case when the paratroopers disobeyed orders in the Sinai Campaign, Dayan wrote: "A number of General Staff officers informed

me, to their acute consternation, that I was treating the paratroopers apologetically even though I knew that their attack beyond the Mitla had fatal results and went against my orders." (Dayan, *Diary of the Sinai Campaign*, p. 91)

A soldier displays initiative when he responds to developing situations by taking matters into his own hands. A soldier with a high degree of self-confidence often exhibits originality and ingenuity in taking the initiative. This type of soldier is blessed with natural leadership qualities.

To increase the self-confidence of combat troops, the IDF integrated the paratroopers into a lower command echelon and assigned them the responsibility for the carrying out combat missions. This was the case of Avraham Halwa, the company sergeant of "D" Company, who, in 1955, was appointed commander of a twenty-two man force in a reprisal action in the Gaza Strip. The integration of junior commanders into the echelons increased their self-confidence and ability to intervene in situations calling for initiative.

Unit 101 generally operated in small teams beyond the lines. Initiative was mainly in the form of improvisation for overcoming the paucity of means and information.

One of the unit's leading figures, Meir Har-Zion, later defined the unit's approach to initiative: "A mission was a mission; an objective an objective; and everyone was responsible for his actions. Everyone had to take the initiative . . . and every commander was also expected to take the initiative." (Har-Zion, *Diary Chapters*, p. 136)

Professional paratrooper commanders were ordered to devise new methods of offensive fighting, not because of inferior equipment or

shortage of manpower, but because by taking the initiative they could attain the element surprise. It was common for a non-com or junior officer in the paratroopers to take the initiative when his commander was put out of action. The phrase ". . . he took responsibility" was frequently heard in the battalion. The General Staff admired such initiatives and expressed its satisfaction with the can-do attitude that the paratroopers demonstrated and rewarded them with medals for bravery. The following examples speak for themselves:

The Medal of Courage was awarded to Corporal Avshalom Adam for taking the initiative, after all of the officers in his unit were killed in a night attack during the battle for Mitla in the Sinai Campaign on October 30, 1956. Corporal Adam (Avsha Adamovich) took charge of the unit and continued to carry out the mission."

The Medal of Courage was awarded to Dovik Tamari for taking the initiative in the Qalqilya action. On October 10, 1956, Second Lieutenant Dov Tamari was a platoon commander engaged in blocking operations during the Qalqilya action. When the company commander was wounded, Lieutenant Tamri assumed command of the company and held out under extreme conditions."

The armor corps also underwent drastic changes with the arrival of Israel Tal (a veteran of the British Army), a strict disciplinary who introduced a stringent military code that verged on the suppression of independent thinking. But discipline also created an absolute trust in every man's commitment to mission accomplishment, to striving for contact with the enemy, and assuming command. Discipline led to absolute trust in the military systems' efforts to support all units to the best of their abilities.

The IDF is a rigid and bureaucratic organization like all militaries. It is made up of modern C2 and support systems on paper and orders that stymie mission command. But after the first bullet is fired, the cultural values, leadership and morale-building lessons, and commanders' personal responsibility to their subordinates supersede the limitations of paper-bound organization. Real life is what counts. Mission command functions smoothly in the IDF despite the surrounding systems. The contrast between what is said and what is done is known. It is also known that mission command suits us best. Modern technology is a disruptive factor on this point, and the clash of wills between a commander who wants supreme control and a tactical commander who is responsible for the mission and his men exists in the IDF as it does everywhere else. In reality the tactical commander wins, and the system that limits him knows the consequences. The struggle goes on. Mission command is engrained in the Jewish culture of improvisation and survival that no technological system can preempt.

A professional military officer knows how to run a system efficiently and responsibly. Knowledge is acquired through study and specialization. It includes practical skills, theoretical knowledge, expertise, and hands-on experience. The greater the acquired knowledge and experience, the higher the level of professionalism.

After the military failures of the 1950s, Ben-Gurion and Dayan raised the level of professionalism in the IDF and revolutionized the training of men and officers (Milstein, *The History of the Paratroopers*, p. 139). In the first stage, officers had to complete their high school education; and others were sent to higher education and special programs at the Technion (Israel Institute of Technology) at the IDF's expense. (Moshe Dayan, *Milestones*, p. 147) Specific professional courses were opened for

commanders, such as the Commando Course at the Guerilla Warfare School. The introduction of professionalism in all levels changed the method of training recruits, squad leaders, and officers, and enhanced the commander's profile.

Professionalization in the paratrooper unit was measured by operational success. At first the paratroopers carried out mainly night operations and small team actions. This demanded professional expertise in team leadership, night navigation, and the use of light weapons. Since then operational activity has become far more complex, requiring the ability to control company- and battalion-size movement, handle a wide-range of weapons, and read battle maps. The commander must be proficient in all areas of soldiering and must also be the best soldier in his unit.

In this context Sharon made an interesting experiment in the paratroopers when he sent jump school commanders to specialize in commanding a combat company in the 88th and 890th Battalions. Professional training and technology continued to develop, and a commander had to be constantly updated on advances in the humanities and technical professions. The commander's level of professionalism was regularly evaluated by the criterion of mission performance.

The battle heritage stories that the commander is reared on do not describe dress parades or mass assaults, they focus on values: sacrifice, courage, devotion. They deal with the human side of operations and serve as examples. Only after centuries do military historians describe the military gain as the essence.

The Um Katef Battle in the Six-Day War is an example of an organized battle planned and directed according to military doctrinal

models. The liberation of Jerusalem, in the same war, was a disorganized battle, rife with blunders but also with outstanding displays of individual initiative and personal sacrifice, and as such is used as a model in IDF battle heritage studies. Um Katef has a military value; the liberation of Jerusalem has cultural value; and the link between the two creates a quality, victorious army.

Conclusion

Trust in the commander and the system is gained many years before the fighting. It is acquired as a matter of routine in training and drills, and is the sine qua non for mission command. Today, while commanders live in a value-based culture and their education takes place in school, society, and military training, it is the military system that creates restraints. It does not adapt because it operates under the watchful eye of the public by means of the determinedly critical, prying, exposing media.

The system places restrictions in the form of legal advisors, public relations specialists, and the like who ride on the back of the commander and whose function is not to support him and his conduct in combat but to protect him and the system above him from being prosecuted, libeled, and hounded. This is done by means of limitations placed on him and guidelines from the bureaucratic systems that require approval from above. Naturally this leads to conflicts of interest between the commander and his values versus the system's needs, between the noble words in the doctrine manuals and the real world.

Jewish culture provides IDF commanders with wiggle room. The system, which recognizes its own limitations, encourages them to act even if they bend the rules a little and are punished for it. The system

always makes sure that it remains on the personal level and does not open a door to limiting genuine freedom of thought and action.

The IDF's emphasis on unit solidarity reaches its peak in the ground forces' reserve layout which makes up 60 percent of the units' order of battle at the company, battalion, and brigade level. As the solidarity matures over the years, it serves as a unifying factor that the officers and men take with them into battle. The soldier fights for his buddies and commanders and is ready to sacrifice his life for them.

Mission command must be integrated into the disciplinary system despite the apparent contradiction between the two. The truth is that they complement one another: discipline creates the framework and rules in which command develops. It must not be allowed to hamper thinking and initiative. It has to create the tools that turn a successful slip of discipline into valuable lesson learning. Discipline is what creates the army and routine; exceptions and initiative are what drive the army to victory in extraordinary situations.

A dynamic army is not built on blind obedience. A dynamic army creates ideologies, values that accompany its actions, cultural values that are ethical, personal, and unit oriented, and around which discipline and organization are forged. In the moment of truth a skilled commander will deal with this dichotomy, but the system must provide him with support and operational freedom. The system also creates the tools that adopt or discard the lessons of his actions.

Studying and deriving lessons in real time is part of mission command. Professionalism, credibility, open-mindedness and an intellectually honest organizational system are what motivate the commander to learn, absorb, and act.

The decentralized battlefield presents formidable challenges to mission command. Fighting takes place in smaller frameworks than in the past, and an increasing number of commanders and junior officers have to face the decisions they make. The overall system is diffuse and under the threat of homing guidance systems and new fighting environments. It sets up limitations in order to protect itself.

Cooperation is based on the joint understanding of the situation and ability. It is also based on mutual trust, assessment, and security that enable the commander to maximize his leadership skills instead of spending his time building the structure, organization, and defense he needs when called before investigating committees.

The commander must maintain his superior professionalism, serve as a personal example, and respect his men. He will not send his men on a mission that he is not prepared to carry out. He leads them and is found at the critical time in the critical place. He receives the strength and trust from his men and commanders that enable him to take the initiative and lead his troops.