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## MILITARY LEADERSHIP COMPETENCIES AND THE MISSION COMMAND APPROACH

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*ABSTRACT: Adequate responses – both from individuals and organizations – to the increasingly complex challenges of the 21st century presuppose a combination of leadership competencies essential for effective and successful mission accomplishment in the changing security and operational environment. Creating a network environment that characterizes today's operations (also at the tactical leadership level) increases the commander's responsibility. The increasingly complex operational environment demands that decentralization be emphasized in the decision-making process and the conduct of operations. Furthermore, the fleeting opportunities in emerging tactical situations also require quick reactions and timely and correct decisions of small unit leaders. The paper provides a short, summary analysis of mission command and the leadership competencies, capabilities, and skills necessary for the mission command approach.*

*KEYWORDS: mission command, competency, leadership, changing security and operational environment*

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## INTRODUCTION

The new challenges arising from a comprehensive interpretation of security and the quick responses to be given to them, the transformation of warfare, the spread of multi-domain warfare, the rapid development of information technology, and the all-encompassing digitalization require a specific approach to command and battle management, and so does the terrain, which has become a glass table due to the effectiveness of reconnaissance tools. Thus, it became necessary to disperse and split one's forces before their deployment in order to protect them.

Challenges emerging in our world – which are characterized by increased speed and interdependence, and the incredibly fast-paced and intensive change of technology occurring on an unimaginable scale – demand continuous adaptability from every organization, which naturally also entails the transformation of the approach to leadership. In the age of digital, decentralized communication networks, cooperation and problem-solving must take place in real time with the highest possible efficiency, in an innovative way. In an environment characterized by accelerated operational tempo, the complexity of emerging

situations, grey-zone hybrid conflicts, increased data volumes, and the spread of artificial intelligence, military leaders are expected to be able to immediately adapt to the changed circumstances.

From the aspect of mission accomplishment based on allied multinational cooperation, it is also necessary to work out, deepen, and continuously develop a mission command approach and mindset. Nowadays, the role of the time factor and the immediate adaptation to increasingly fast-paced changes have become important, so the usual methods and management schemes are no longer able to provide solutions in every case. The mission command approach can be an excellent tool for increasing efficiency, maximizing success, and utilizing the full spectrum of abilities and skills.

From the point of view of this approach to command, the leader's personality is also of crucial importance. The selection of a leader with appropriate competencies is not only important for the individual professional development of the given person but is also an excellent tool for maintaining and increasing the efficiency of the human resource management process and organizational activity. This is especially true of the representatives of armed forces and law enforcement organizations since the person wearing the uniform embodies the organization, the organizational attitude, and its values. It is particularly true in leadership positions, as in this case, beyond setting a personal example and personal character traits, another important aspect is to preserve and deepen the motivation of one's colleagues.

## THE CHARACTERISTICS OF MISSION COMMAND

We can consider mission command as leadership based on the division of legal powers, which takes place between commanders and their subordinates to attain a clearly defined objective, with definite intent, within a defined framework of authority, and with a defined area of responsibility, while at the same time, providing the necessary conditions and resources to achieve that objective.

According to Péter Lippai, "mission command can be interpreted as a human-centered leadership philosophy where, in addition to defining the goal to be achieved, the superior puts constraints on the method of execution only to the minimum extent necessary for coordination. This fact gives subordinates a great deal of autonomy previously unimaginable in our armed forces, which, when coupled with the provision of conditions for execution, can greatly increase the success of mission accomplishment in the rapidly changing circumstances, characteristic of modern warfare."<sup>1</sup> A paper co-authored by Zoltán Bárány and Péter Lippai also confirms this definition: "The essence of mission command as a style of military leadership is that only a framework-like goal is defined for subordinates during the tasking, but not the path leading to it."<sup>2</sup> However, the delegation of the right to make decisions presupposes maximum trust: "The unity of command depends on the commander. If he can bring subordinate commanders, chiefs, and leaders to his side, then the command will be united."<sup>3</sup> The approach and method that presupposes trust also presupposes free-

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<sup>1</sup> Lippai 2009, 30–31.

<sup>2</sup> Bárány – Lippai 2009, 18.

<sup>3</sup> Takács 2016, 79.

dom of action taken to achieve the goal, as well as close cooperation, independent initiative, and proactivity.<sup>4</sup>

In my view, mission command can be interpreted as a kind of approach. It is a complexity built on the unity of the leader's mindset and leadership competencies, which also functions as an ongoing interaction between the leader and the subordinates based on a common understanding. It is an approach enhancing professional development that also influences the level of the individual and that of the organization, while also being a warfighting function. An important feature of mission command is that the decisions are made by those who are best placed to make them at any given moment, having detailed information about the given situation and change.<sup>5</sup>

In an environment defined by uncertain and unpredictable circumstances changing at an accelerated pace (VUCA<sup>6</sup>) that is particularly characteristic of our time, an adaptive, cooperation-based, decentralized mode of command is much more capable of supporting the effective realization of the superior's intent than a centralized command approach based on formalities, pushing individual motivation and initiative to the background, while not giving immediate responses to quick changes.

The so-called OODA Loop<sup>7</sup> can significantly support the success of the mission command approach. This method, which is also an approach, is "a kind of cyclical decision-making mechanism in which the decision-maker assesses and evaluates the situation, makes a decision quickly, and then acts accordingly. Its basic premise is that one should not fear uncertainty and should always make decisions and take action according to the current situation."<sup>8</sup>

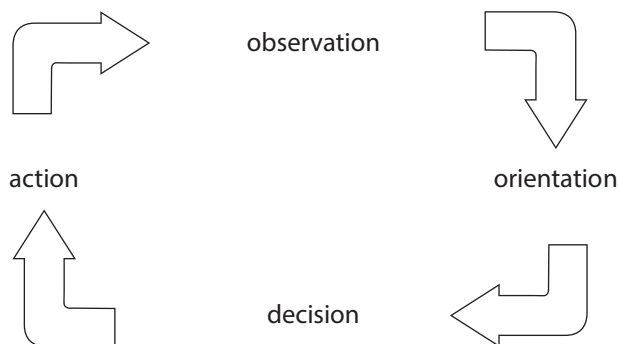


Figure 1 *Flowchart of the OODA Loop method*<sup>9</sup>

The assessment and observation of the situation based on a continuous flow of systematized information and trend analysis are important in the course of the mechanism. This is followed by questioning and rebuilding current paradigms and models. All this allows

<sup>4</sup> Jobbágy – Czeglédi 2016, 86.

<sup>5</sup> A Multinational Capability Development Campaign Project 2020.

<sup>6</sup> VUCA: volatile, uncertain, complex, ambiguous

<sup>7</sup> OODA (Observation, Orientation, Decision, Action): a multi-step decision-making process or approach. The method was developed by Colonel John Boyd (1927–1997), a former pilot. The original name of the method was OODA loop, which refers to the continuous cycle of the mechanism.

<sup>8</sup> Porkoláb 2017, 145–154.

<sup>9</sup> Boyd 2019.

one to assess the situation in a new light. This process of orientation does not focus on the final result but rather on the given momentary state. This is followed by the most optimal decision made based on the information available at the given moment, which – due to the dynamically changing environment – naturally includes the possibility of mistakes and failures as well. The correctness of the decision can be tested in action: after the decision is made, immediate action is required. After taking action, we can get feedback on which (sub)elements work and which need to be changed. This way, this mechanism results in a kind of learning process, which leads not only to the development of the individual's abilities and competencies but also to the deepening of the adaptability, cohesion, and professional knowledge base of the organization.

Comparing the command-based leadership as an approach to the mission command may facilitate its understanding even more. In contrast to a rigid, ponderous leadership approach, a mission command approach evaluates the role of horizontal relationships as well as the creative and the most competent use of the available resources in order to achieve a determined objective. In today's particularly uncertain and unpredictable environment – defined by rapidly changing circumstances – an adaptive, cooperative, and decentralized leadership approach is more likely to support the effective realization of the leader's intentions than a centralized leadership approach based on formalities, which discourages individual motivation and initiatives and does not respond immediately to rapid changes. Responding effectively to the changes in the security environment and warfare requires a change in the leadership approach as well since the rigid, centralized leadership forms are not or merely suitable for dealing with new types of armed conflicts.

Mission command can be the key to success, although it is important to emphasize that it can only be effective if the subordinates' freedom of thought and decision does not jeopardize the commander's intention, and if autonomy does not mean arbitrariness and the freedom of initiation does not mean uncontrol. The change in approach, and therefore the mission command, can only be successful if it can be adopted in all levels of leadership, without inner resistance based on fears of deviation from the norm, leaving the comfort zone, or fear triggered by personal incompetence.

## MILITARY LEADERS' COMPETENCIES

The commanders, leaders at the helm of military organizations lead these organizations within a framework defined by the law and superiors. Their service authority covers all operational areas of the military organizations led by them: they bear full responsibility for the combat readiness of the military organizations, the preparation and training of the personnel, ensuring the functioning, the personnel's discipline, the effective activities and financial management of the military organizations subordinate to them, carrying out the superiors' orders, and compliance with legal norms.<sup>10</sup>

Competency is a word of Latin origin: it means aptitude and skillfulness. David McClelland,<sup>11</sup> whose name is associated with the foundation of competency theories, besides defining the features connected with achievement, also assessed the mindsets and behaviors associated

<sup>10</sup> Act CXIII 2011.

<sup>11</sup> David Clarence McClelland (1917–1998) was an American psychologist, his Human Motivation Theory is one of the best-known psychological models of human needs, especially in business life and related to organizations.

with successful performance, which are in a causal relationship with it.<sup>12</sup> By competency we mean “those basic defining personal qualities and traits that are causally related to performance rated as excellent or at least above average in relation to a given job, based on a predetermined level of criteria”.<sup>13</sup> Another definition states: “Competency is the ability and willingness of the individual to transform his knowledge, skills, abilities, and attitudinal characteristics into successful problem-solving actions.”<sup>14</sup> It is important to formulate competencies clearly and distinctly since the desired pattern of behavior can only be achieved through unambiguous communication.

“Decree No. 10/2015<sup>15</sup> of the Ministry of Defence on medical, mental and physical fitness for military service and on the review procedure” lays down the requirements for general psychological status according to three decisive criteria. The relevant regulations distinguish seven personality characteristics in terms of personality traits: balance of emotional and impulsive life, stress tolerance, frustration tolerance, self-control, adequate behavior, self-confidence, and self-knowledge. When determining the intelligence level (IQ), the focus is on measuring general intelligence (logical, combinatoric, problem-solving skills), memory, and communication skills. In terms of sensorimotor and perceptual performance, the measurement points include general attentional performance, perception, stimulus discrimination, reaction time, and movement coordination. Based on the job map, job requirements – beyond the aspects of general psychological fitness – determine the set of abilities, skills, and personality traits required to perform the given job (e.g., tanker, artilleryman, field chaplain, etc.). Personality traits are already discussed in more detail and nuance. The requirements include, among others, psychomotor tempo, adaptability, commitment, rule consciousness, and initiative. In terms of intelligence level, logic, information processing, creativity, and flexibility are among the expectations. Requirements for sensorimotor performance and perceptual performance include, for example, spatial orientation, tolerance for monotony, concentration of attention, and accuracy. The decree lays down specific requirements for those serving in areas of operation, taking into account the specific nature of their service. The requirements for firefighters and those performing general foreign service are set out separately in the job descriptions.

The relevant legislation also defines military leadership requirements. Beyond general psychological fitness, an effective military leader at a given level must possess the following skills, abilities, and personality traits necessary for command:

The creation of a network environment typical of today’s military operations – including the tactical command level – increases the commanders’ responsibility. Decentralization needs to receive greater focus in the context of an increasingly complex operational environment, decision-making procedures, and operational command. The right decision made at the right time depending on the commanders’ reactions of the small unit is also important in consideration of the intensively increasing significance of emerging tactical situations. With regard to general competencies, it is important for military leaders to easily and quickly understand the context of the operational situation and the factors influencing it. It is indispensable that they take the initiative and act in the situation they are faced with in

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<sup>12</sup> Bolgár 2014, 128.

<sup>13</sup> Bolgár 2014, 128.

<sup>14</sup> Bolgár 2014, 129.

<sup>15</sup> Decree No. 10/2015.

Personality traits	Intelligence level	Leadership and organizational skills
Networking skills	Logic	Planning and organizational skills
Initiative	Creativity	Decision-making skills
Cooperative skills	Insight	Problem-solving skills
Reliability		Information management
Empathy		Strategic thinking
Morality		Team-building skills
Level of aspiration		Management skills
Flexibility		Motivating ability
Psychomotor tempo		Communication skills
Independence		Skill to endure criticism
Commitment		Intellectual efficiency
Rule consciousness		Mental load capacity

Figure 2 Skills, abilities, and personality characteristics required for command (Table edited by the author)

such a way that they can continuously influence events and constantly adapt to changing circumstances. By achieving tactical goals, they are able to support the implementation of objectives on the operational and strategic levels, while at the same time, they can also harmonize their activities with continuous changes. In addition, they can build teams and team cohesion to motivate their subordinates.

Highlighting the responses to be given to challenges generated by the rapidly changing security environment and focusing on the characteristics of today’s operational environment, Gábor Boldizsár concludes that “the subordinate military organization or formation is usually at a great distance from the sending commander, so continuous guidance and decision support can be difficult or is not provided at all. The commander must be able to make ad hoc decisions on the spot based on well-developed, well-established orders, directives, and guidelines.”<sup>16</sup>

To ensure rapid and flexible responses to challenges that are adapted to changes in warfare, the ideal military leader:

- effectively applies the professional knowledge of its branch of service in practice;
- is open-minded across the full spectrum of operations, able to think outside the box, and break with familiar stereotypes;
- adapts to new challenges, can act both as a leader and cooperator during network operations;
- is able to track rapid changes individually and implement organizational adaptation at the institutional level as well;
- is able to perform the same role in an international environment as their national position;
- courageous and determined: can recognize and exploit opportunities in complex operational environments;
- is innovative and adaptive at both his/her own and lower levels of command;

<sup>16</sup> Boldizsár 2014, 33–34.

- is a master of operational art even in multi-domain environments;
- is able to assert national interests at the strategic level;
- has a high level of cultural awareness and language proficiency.<sup>17</sup>

According to General Schwarzkopf,<sup>18</sup> “leadership is a potent combination [and coeffect] of strategy and character”, but the totality of personality traits, charisma, is much more important than strategy. We can learn more from negative leadership practices than from positive ones as they show us how not to lead people. In his view, the ability to control and the related competencies are of paramount importance.<sup>19</sup>

According to General Stanley McChrystal,<sup>20</sup> “leaders are empathetic”: they have the ability to understand, empathize, and communicate effectively with those they lead. In his opinion, “they need not agree or share the same background or status in society as their followers, but they understand their hopes, fears”, plans, strengths, and weaknesses. “Leadership is not popularity,” especially not in the military hierarchy: “For soldiers, the choice between popularity and effectiveness is ultimately no choice at all. Soldiers want to win; their survival depends upon it”. Military “leaders are genuine”. Based on General McChrystal’s experience, subordinates would tolerate a commander’s being less of a leader than he hoped to be but they would not forgive him for being less than he claimed to be. “Simple honesty matters.” The general points out that intellect or charisma play a significant role in leadership but “neither are required nor enough” for someone to become a good leader. “Physical appearance, poise, and outward self-confidence can be confused with leadership – for a time.” In his opinion and experience, the emphasis is much more on the extent a given leader can recognize his strengths and weaknesses, how well he can use them to his advantage, how effectively he can exploit and utilize them, to what extent he has a real self-image, self-esteem, self-confidence, and determination.

Also, genuineness and self-discipline are essential for a leader. “Leaders walk a fine line between self-confidence and humility.” In his view, “soldiers want leaders who are sure of their ability to lead the team to success but humble enough to recognize their limitations. [...] It [is] better to admit ignorance or fear than to display false knowledge or bravado. And candidly admitting doubts or difficulties is key to building confidence in your honesty. But expressing doubts and confidence is a delicate balance. When things look their worst, followers look to the leader for reassurance that they can and will succeed”, as well as for calm assessment of the situation and guidance. “Leaders are human.” They have their own emotions, no matter how much they strive for objectivity. However, really good military leaders constantly strive “to be the best humans they could be.” As well as to admit and take responsibility for their mistakes because mistakes are part of the process and progress of learning.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>17</sup> Takács et al. 2021, 37–38.

<sup>18</sup> Herbert Norman Schwarzkopf, Jr. (1934–2012) was an American general. From 1988 to 1991, he commanded the United States Central Command (CENTCOM) and then served as commander-in-chief of the coalition forces during the Gulf War.

<sup>19</sup> Kruse 2012.

<sup>20</sup> General Stanley McChrystal (1954–) retired as the commander of the U.S. and NATO forces of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) fighting in Afghanistan.

<sup>21</sup> McChrystal [no year].

## MILITARY LEADERS AND THE MISSION COMMAND APPROACH

In my judgment and experience, the effectiveness of performing the tasks of an organizational unit depends to a significant extent on the leader's person, personality, leadership competencies, and human qualities, thus on his/her leadership style and approach. If they do not have an internal need for a different approach to command, leaders socialized in an environment dominated by a "detailed command" approach find it more difficult to identify with and genuinely represent an entirely different approach. However, changed circumstances, hybrid warfare, the use of highly mobile forces in a rapidly changing environment, the availability of real-time information, and even the demographic characteristics of the personnel should encourage leaders at all levels of command to face this challenge.

It is important to emphasize that mutual trust and respect – effective in both directions – are indispensable for success: superiors know the subordinates' abilities, training level, professional and human characteristics, strengths and limitations, and energy reserves, while subordinates are able to think with their superiors' heads and identify with their intentions in the interest of attaining a common objective.

A leader "need not be a close observer of men, a sharp dissector of human character but he must know the character, feelings, habits, the peculiar faults, and inclinations of those whom he is to command."<sup>22</sup>

Respect should in no way be based on coercion because that would result in fear, low efficiency, and loss of trust. The humanity of leadership must play a decisive role in this approach to command: commanders consider their subordinates as partners and involve them in decision-making by utilizing and exploiting their professional qualities and skills in the right sense, thereby strengthening the soundness of their own decisions and raising the likelihood of successful mission accomplishment and task execution. This also presupposes that commanders maintain a continuous dialogue with their subordinate colleagues; however, this communication can only be effective if it supports initiatives and new and unconventional proposals for solutions formulated to achieve organizational goals, and does so without retaliation. As a result of this method, the subordinates' motivation, their attachment to the organization, and their identification with the organizational goals and tasks continue to deepen, as do the team spirit, camaraderie, and loyalty. All this exerts a fundamentally positive effect on the retaining power of the organization.

The flow of information, as part of communication and an unambiguous expression of the commander's intent, should be multidirectional as a means of achieving a common understanding of the task. All organizational elements involved in the implementation of the task, working in cooperation and continuously interacting with each other, must have the basic information necessary for the achievement of the set objectives.

Leaders with a mission command approach respect their subordinates' human rights and do not humiliate them but rather inspire them while representing and conveying values through personal example. In my opinion, genuineness is of key importance in all manifestations of a leader, including outward appearance and conduct, external and internal communication, decision-making processes, and the system of relationships with subordinates. At the same time, it is necessary to take into account an aspect of the human factor, namely the fact that leaders are also humans: although they are the ones who obviously bear the responsibility, in certain situations, by exercising self-criticism, they do not undermine

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<sup>22</sup> Clausewitz 1999, 102.



their authority but may even increase their genuineness. The mission command approach requires awareness and deep self-knowledge of commanders: they must be clear on their strengths and weaknesses but must also possess the ability of self-reflection.

I consider it important to experience successes achieved together, as well as continuous feedback from leaders to subordinates, both in terms of confirmation and criticism. However, the possibility of mistakes should not be overrated: mistakes and conflicts should be part of organizational learning and training, and as such, they should serve as opportunities for development. It is the leader's responsibility to establish and operate an organization that is based on the lessons learned and is capable of continuously adopting new knowledge and methods.

## CONCLUSION

With regard to the responses to increased risks and challenges related to the complex, comprehensive interpretation of security, the abilities to adapt and react immediately to changing situations play a key role, which presupposes independence, creativity, proactivity, flexibility, initiative, and an approach based on a decentralized decision-making process that is open to new methods and solutions at all levels of command.

Of course, just like the change of the entire organizational culture, the transformation of the command approach cannot take place overnight: change presupposes a conscious organizational learning process building from the foundations. The basic pillars of this complex process are quality education, preparation, and professional training provided in support of the deepening, value-based, healthy self-confidence, independent thinking, and initiative, as well as the continuous development of leadership competencies and the objective implementation of leader selection based on real-world performance and evaluation.

In my view, mission command points beyond the successful execution of a given task: it provides commanders with a tool and thus an opportunity that, in addition to being efficient, is suitable for building coherent communities and teams that are deeply committed to common values and the common mission, coherent, and prioritize cooperation and common principles, as well as organizational identity.

Mission command can be the key to success but it is important to emphasize that it is effective only if the conditions discussed earlier are simultaneously ensured, if the subordinates' freedom of thought and decision does not jeopardize the commander's intent, if autonomy does not mean a self-serving attitude, and if freedom of initiative does not amount to uncontrollability. The change of attitude, and thus mission command can be successful only if leaders can identify with it at all levels of command and there is no inner resistance deriving from the fear of deviation from the usual, of leaving the comfort zone, or of one's own incompetence.

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