

Process-Based Decision Making Drives Efficient, Engaged Units

By Major Joel W. Busboom

To truly understand leadership, one must understand the power of following a process, as opposed to a person. When a process is followed, egos have a hard time justifying their existence, solutions have a hard time showing up before the problem statement, and members of a team have a much better chance of showing each other trust and respect. Conversely, when using command directives in place of a process, the opposite becomes true. The person with the highest rank or the loudest voice is oftentimes the person who delivers the solution; input from others is minimized, and trust for the leader and among team members is reduced. In short, failure to show respect for the process reduces respect for the team. Furthermore, the results of the consistent use of an expedited methodology do not favorably compare to those obtained using the proper process. One example is the use of the rapid decision-making and synchronization process, as opposed to the military decision-making process (MDMP). While using the rapid decision-making and synchronization process is better than using no process at all, it decreases respect for the process, which reduces respect for the team. Such expedited methods may be necessary in time-constrained situations, but they need not happen all the time. Army Doctrine Publication (ADP) 6-22, *Army Leadership and the Profession*, addresses this issue:

All leaders are susceptible to displaying counterproductive leadership behaviors in times of stress, high operational tempo, or other chaotic conditions to achieve short-term results. Counterproductive leadership decreases followers' well-being, engagement, and undermines the organization's readiness and ability to accomplish the mission in the long term. It can have an adverse effect on the unit with cascading results, such as

*lowering morale, commitment, cohesion, effectiveness, readiness, and productivity. Counterproductive leadership behaviors prevent establishing a positive organizational climate and interfere with mission accomplishment, especially in highly complex operational settings. Prolonged use of counterproductive leadership destroys unit morale, trust, and undermines the followers' commitment to the mission. Counterproductive leadership can also decrease task performance, physical and psychological well-being, and increase negative outcomes such as depression or burnout.*¹

As current and future leaders, officers must have the personal courage, sense of duty, and desire to show respect throughout the chain of command necessary to ask the sometimes difficult question, "What process are we using to solve this problem?" Every officer should understand that simple question and know what the answer should be. "What step are we on?" is another question that officers should be able to ask and answer. Officers must understand the second- and third-order effects of failing to use doctrinal, process-based decision making and speak up when they believe that there is a problem.

Process Drives Engagement

A DP 5-0, *The Operations Process*, discusses five Army planning methodologies; they are—

- MDMP.
- Army design methodology.
- Troop leading procedures.
- Rapid decision-making and synchronization process.
- Army problem solving.²

“ . . . the commander must not lose sight of command climate and the importance of synchronizing the team. This is especially true for commanders at higher levels, due to the trickle-down effects of reactive decision making.”

The MDMP is the foundation for all Army decision-making processes. Troop leading procedures, the rapid decision-making and synchronization process, and the Army problem-solving model were all derived from MDMP. And Army design methodology is designed to help develop the problem statement for MDMP. The main benefit of all of these methodologies is that they drive engagement and collaboration. Chapter 9 of Field Manual (FM) 6-0, *Commander and Staff Organization and Operations*, addresses this concept and explains how the MDMP facilitates it:

*The higher headquarters solicits input and continuously shares information concerning future operations through planning meetings, warning orders, and other means. It shares information with subordinate and adjacent units, supporting and supported units, and unified action partners. Commanders encourage active collaboration among all organizations affected by pending operations to build a shared understanding of the situation, participate in course-of-action [COA] development and decision making, and resolve conflicts before publishing the plan or order.*³

If performed correctly, the MDMP, or any doctrinal process, does a great job of driving engagement and input from the team. This is extremely important when it comes to the areas of critical and creative thinking. The conversation systematically includes diverse viewpoints. Engagement allows Soldiers to make their views heard. The first opportunity to really drive engagement and unity of effort is when determining the problem statement. When team members work together to ensure that they are all on the same page with respect to the problem they are solving, they become greatly aligned throughout the rest of the process. The importance of obtaining group consensus on the problem statement cannot be overstated.

Engagement also plays a role in COA approval. It is very easy for the “unheard” to disengage when they feel that a COA is not their idea. However, encouraging people to speak and listening to them will engage them in the plan because it gives them a chance to provide input. The commander will then have a team that has collaborated and is engaged with the approved COA.

Engagement Drives Trust and Respect

According to ADP 6-22, “Trust is the foundation of the Army’s relationship with the American people, who rely on the Army to ethically, effectively, and efficiently serve the Nation. Within the Army profession, trust is shared confidence among commanders, subordinates, and partners in that all can be relied on and all are

competent in performing their assigned tasks.”⁴ For those in charge, putting the process ahead of emotions is an outstanding way to show everyone that they are important and that you trust their input. Furthermore, it aligns the team with regard to the process in use and the current step. While Section 9-11 of FM 6-05 discusses the staff’s efforts during MDMP, it illustrates the true power of a process in uniting a team:

*The staff’s effort during the MDMP focuses on helping the commander understand the situation, make decisions, and synchronize those decisions into a fully developed plan or order. Staff activities during planning initially focus on mission analysis. The products the staff develops during mission analysis help commanders understand the situation and develop the commander’s visualization. During COA development and COA comparison, the staff provides recommendations to support the commander in selecting a COA. After the commander makes a decision, the staff prepares the plan or order that reflects the commander’s intent, coordinating all necessary details.*⁵

One of the great powers of the process is that it synchronizes team members and helps facilitate teamwork. It engages people in the process and with each other. Synchronization of a team drives trust and respect amongst team members. Conversely, when people are not synchronized and are not working as a team, a breakdown in trust and respect for one another occurs. This is a precipice for more and more significant issues, until a leader—any leader—can steer the team back into doctrinal, process-based decision making.

It is important that commanders understand that process clarity is extremely important in gaining the trust of the team. Command direction can be a great tool in a very time-constrained environment, and subordinates often understand that. But when it is overused, trust starts to break down. Commanders are under a great pressure most of the time; that’s the nature of the Army and the command position. However, the commander must not lose sight of command climate and the importance of synchronizing the team. This is especially true for commanders at higher levels, due to the trickle-down effects of reactive decision making. Most people are aware of the 1/3–2/3 rule, where higher units use 1/3 of the time to plan and leave 2/3 of the time for lower units to plan. When higher units do not respect this rule, it is difficult for lower units to respect it because they are not given as much planning time as needed. Lower units also observe that it is “acceptable” to command-direct and not use the approved planning timeline. This leads many units to be reactive and many

units to lose the engagement and the trust of their subordinates because the appropriate process cannot (or will not) be used.

When the process to be used is discussed, everyone realizes that process-based decision making is important. This sets the command climate as calm and efficient versus reactive and panicked. All officers know that a process should be used. When the process is not used by higher units, lower units get a pass. This is how a lack of trust and respect at higher levels gets propagated down the chain of command, and this is why counterproductive leadership can result in devastating situations.

Trust and Respect Drive Efficiency

Efficiency is defined “the ability to do something or produce something without wasting materials, time, or energy.”⁶ You’ll notice that this definition has more to do with not wasting resources as opposed to getting more out of the resources that are being used. When people are not shown the proper trust and respect to give their input into a decision, they are going to disengage. Most of us have been in that situation or seen it happen. This directly leads to wasting the time and energy of those individuals and immediately reduces the efficiency of the team, and it doesn’t stop there. When people are disengaged, they don’t just stop contributing, they find other things to do. Oftentimes, these activities are counterproductive and detrimental to the mission. As the saying goes, “Idle hands are the devil’s playground.”⁷

Page 1-7 of ADP 6-0, *Mission Command: Command and Control of Army Forces*, states, “Mutual trust is essential to successful mission command, and it must flow throughout the chain of command. Subordinates are more willing to exercise initiative when they believe their commander trusts them. They will also be more willing to exercise initiative if they believe their commander will accept and support the outcome of their decisions. Likewise, commanders delegate greater authority to subordinates who have demonstrated tactical and technical competency and whose judgment they trust.”⁸

If leaders have a go-to question when it comes to problem-solving (for example: What process are we using to solve this problem?), they will immediately boost the trust of those around them and the efficiency of the team. This can be counterintuitive (similar to the cavemen that don’t have the time to stop and listen about the round wheels); however, the second- and third-order effects of failing to follow a process will lead to a much more inefficient team in the long term. Leaders cannot miss this point.

Conclusion

It is incumbent upon every officer to learn about process-based decision making and to demand the use of the most appropriate methodology in a situation. In this way, today’s leader can help drive trust, respect, and efficiency in the Army and help avoid the issues that come with choosing “readiness over respect.” The opportunity to

learn about these processes in great detail is available in the Basic Officers Leadership Course (troop leading procedures) and the captains career courses (troop leading procedures, MDMP and rapid decision-making and synchronization process), Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri. Future Army leaders need to take full advantage of these opportunities because the benefits of these processes are not trivial. After leaving the captains career courses, leaders also need to capitalize on the use of doctrine to drive self-development. There will be many opportunities for an officer to ask, “What process are we using to solve this problem?” and “What step are we on?” The leader who has the personal courage to ask these questions is the one who is going to help a team make great strides toward developing mutual trust and respect and becoming more efficient.

Endnotes:

¹ADP 6-22, *Army Leadership and the Profession*, 31 July 2019.

²ADP 5-0, *The Operations Process*, 31 July 2019.

³FM 6-0, *Commander and Staff Organization and Operations*, 5 May 2014.

⁴ADP 6-22.

⁵FM 6-0.

⁶Efficiency, *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*, <<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/efficiency>>, accessed on 6 January 2022.

⁷Geoffrey Chaucer, *Canterbury Tales, the Tale of Melibee*, 1386.

⁸ADP 6-0, *Mission Command: Command and Control of Army Forces*, 31 July 2019.


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