

Company Command

What I learned
by LtCol Arun Shankar

During my six years as a major, I had the great fortune of serving as a communications company commander in two different companies from two different elements of the MAGTF for a total of three years. My experience allowed me to see company command from a field grade perspective and learn from it with a uniquely mature lens. Therefore, I offer three lessons from this experience. First, I suggest that the primary duty of a field grade commander is to affect command culture, not operations. Second, I determine that the field grade rank offers a unique opportunity for the mentorship of both SNCOs and officers, and this opportunity should be deliberate and impactful. Lastly, I share some peculiarities about communications units and how the highly technical missions of these commands present unique challenges.

Culture

Command culture is the enduring spirit within an organization that allows Marines to regularly achieve their operational mission. It is an indirect path to operational success, but it reinforces maneuver warfare and independence at the lowest levels. I have no qualms about the importance of operations and realize that execution within an MOS is a Marine's primary contribution. However, culture outlasts temporary leadership fashions like burdensome micromanagement or the requirement for repetitive feedback cycles. A strong culture sets the tone for hard work and success without the utterance of those words. Most leaders already know this. However, we often struggle with how to create this type of culture. Rookie commanders may think that random, uncorrelated efforts like family socials, field meets, and days off will automati-

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Meaningful cohesion is established with the platoon. (Photo by LCpl Christian Ayers.)

cally make Marines happy, therefore resulting in higher mission effectiveness. In my experience, these are recipes for failure because they are focused on short-sighted, immediate results. More seasoned commanders might focus on ruggedizing Marines through tough training that brings them together. This type of change takes longer and requires deliberate planning and assessment that is beyond hopeful experimentation.

Culture is implemented differently in organizations based on how they are composed. Simon Sinek, a well-known optimist, has made a living explaining

that the effective messaging of a commander's intent is all that is needed to create a successful organization, and everything else will fall in place. Perhaps this model works well in the profit-oriented business world, but it is only the start of an effective command in the military. The youth of our force, combined with the dangerous nature of our mission, does not yield an environment where boundless creativity and unsupervised action is appropriate. A military command must be structured, disciplined, and resilient. Marines need to be able to do things they do not oth-

erwise want to do, and do those things well. They need to be comfortable being uncomfortable, and they need to be able to lead and manage their subordinates in the same way. Therefore, Marines need to be continually trained and held accountable for their performance in a strict and purposeful manner. To rely solely on the hope that a clear intent will be executed without some level of deliberate management is absolute nonsense.

One of the easiest ways to positively alter culture is to reinforce basic discipline and military traits. Company first sergeants exist primarily for this reason, and that is why they are the commander's primary advisor. Their repeated emphasis on customs, courtesies, uniforms, physical fitness, and overall military standards automatically creates this atmosphere. Consequently, Marines who perform in such an environment naturally develop resilience and problem-solving skills that are necessary in a wartime environment. Furthermore, prescriptive counseling and inspections demonstrate interest in a subordinate's performance and progression. Admittedly, I did not originally believe that an emphasis on garrison standards that are seemingly unrelated to operations would have a positive effect across varied lines of effort. However, after three years of observation, I am convinced there is no other way.

Culture goes hand in hand with morale. But morale is not simply broad happiness. Marines typically are not happy to go on hikes, wake up at 0500, or go to the field when it is raining. In fact, I argue that many tasks in the military fall under this category. Therefore, if these tasks are being executed without artful leadership and teamwork, morale will not be high. I am surprised when Marines tell me that long work days and field operations are surprisingly making them unhappy. That should not be unusual. However, young Marines who do not have leaders who regularly inspect and care about them will sense a void that they cannot always illuminate. This void often manifests itself as a routine morale complaint rather than a desire to be challenged further.

Trust, when defined and implemented properly, positively affects culture.

Marines should be trusted to execute tasks by teaching them and then holding them accountable to performance. Trust is often mischaracterized as allowing Marines to operate freely without guidance or supervision. Contrarily, trust allows a Marine to execute a task within finite parameters, followed by verification. As performance improves, the detail and regularity of these inspections can subside. Most Marines are likely to excel when trust is earned rather than given.

A strong command culture does not necessarily correlate with cohesion across the entire unit. Within communication companies, platoon missions are so disparate that true commonalities between them can rarely be identified. A cursory level of competition and excitement can be bred between them, but the meaningful cohesion is established within the platoon, beginning with the platoon commander. A primary role of the company commander is to mentor the platoon commander to develop and maintain this military culture. This deliberate process should be taught to the platoon commander, much like a teacher does for students.

Different elements of the MAGTF have different command cultures. The division is the most unique of them all, as it is primarily focused on rugged training and tough leadership that is common among combat arms MOSs. Additionally, unlike other elements of the MAGTF, every infantry battalion and regiment in the Marine Corps is on a regular deployment rotation. In other words, service in those units will guarantee a deployment, whereas service in other elements of the MAGTF will more likely result in a stateside tour. Furthermore, since SNCOs and officers within the communications fields are encouraged to serve in every element of the MAGTF, the present duty station of such a leader is likely the first time he has served in that element of the MAGTF. Field grade officers have the experience and authority to comprehend this dynamic and address it with new leaders upon arrival. In my experience, this very direct and personalized set of expectations usually put mid-level leaders on the right track immediately.

Conversely, the absence of these introductions regularly led to mismatched expectations and suboptimal outcomes.

Mentoring Officers and SNCOs

A field grade commander usually has the privilege of having at least as much time in service as most of his SNCOs and all of his officers. Consequently, he should have the experience and confidence to assuredly mentor SNCOs and officers across the entire command with impact and certainty. Unlike a young, inexperienced captain, a field grade commander should understand the mechanics of platoon management, the dynamics of SNCO-officer relationships, and the art of quality staff work. With this level of cognizance, this commander should be able to anticipate almost all common pitfalls of platoon-level leadership and address them before they occur.

Most of the officers within a command are usually lieutenants who do not have prior military service, so they must be actively mentored. They require immediate and direct mentorship because they are learning both how to be officers as well as how to be Marines. Additionally, they are usually in charge of platoons that cannot be run without adequate leadership and managerial skills. Though SNCOs are often the driver behind this effort, lieutenants are formally in charge. Therefore, they need to be held accountable to enforce the commander's intent and deliver results. This mentorship is often effectively delegated to captains who are exceptional at teaching lieutenants the mechanics of leadership and management. However, broader institutional thoughts and lessons learned should be regularly shared by the field grade commander. In my experience, a field grade commander's greatest responsibility is the mentorship and evaluation of his lieutenants.

Within the communications MOS, it is also common to have warrant officers within the unit. Unlike lieutenants, these officers are very experienced and usually have technical expertise that far surpasses anyone else. However, uniquely within a company structure, these warrant officers also often have limited experience as officers. They may

struggle with understanding the difference between a SNCO and an officer, tackling platoon-level tasks as they arise rather than planning, and anticipating larger initiatives that support a wider intent. They are also usually unfamiliar with the unwritten rules of staff work and the most efficient ways to derive decisions from a commander. The field grade commander is the uniquely quali-

is not natural or practical to ask their Marines to teach them how to employ new equipment, so choices are limited on how to mitigate this challenge. Most bases provide refresher training courses that can reintroduce the SNCOs to the equipment, but the most effective way to regain proficiency is by going to the field on a regular basis. Field exercises generally require the setup and tear-

Conclusion

As I write this, I conclude my time at Communications Company, 1st MarDiv, arguably the finest communications outfit presently in the Marine Corps. This unit of almost 300 Marines has not had a DUI in nearly 700 days, has not woken up their CO for a Commander's Significant Notification Event in the last 6 months, and recently received the LtCol Shea Memorial Unit Award from HQMC C4: the award presented to the unit that made the greatest contribution to the communications community in the last year.

Operationally, the company has never been better. Our Marines recently deployed the first ever wireless, garrison NIPR network to a combat operations center in the field. They also innovated technologies to significantly decrease the electromagnetic footprint in the field without diminishing essential communications services. Moreover, our company is the unit of choice for the field testing of experimental capabilities, and our NCOs are constantly innovating new ways to improve tactical communications.

With all due respect to my outstanding young Marines, these accomplishments did not happen by accident. Perhaps we were staffed with exceptional leaders or unusually reliable equipment, or we just had a very good crop of young Marines. But what is more likely is that our leaders adopted a culture solely focused on hard work and mission accomplishment, and that emphasis trickled down to our Marines. They then took intent and executed it brilliantly. I am so proud of them, and so proud to have been on their team.

I will miss my Marines as well as Communications Company. Command truly is the greatest privilege an officer can ever have.



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fied person in the command to foster this mentorship and coach these officers into future roles as advisors and planners for major subordinate command- and MEF-level staffs.

Most leaders would argue that field grade officers do not play a role in SNCO mentorship, but after three years of company command, I wholeheartedly disagree with this premise. In fact, I now argue that it is one of the most essential roles of a field grade officer. A unit cannot operate with substandard SNCOs, so this absolutely critical single point of failure deserves the daily attention of the seasoned commander. Senior master sergeants/first sergeants and master gunnery sergeants/sergeants major certainly play a role in this mentorship formula, but the direction and priority of this leadership is the responsibility of the field grade commander.

Peculiarities of the Communications MOS

The communications MOS is one of the most unique ground combat support MOSs in the Marine Corps. The highly technical aspects of the MOS make it nearly impossible for SNCOs who exit the MOS to return with meaningful proficiency without significant initiatives in self-study. This often leads to a lack of confidence, which can then trickle into an inability to manage and lead subordinates. For most SNCOs, it

is not natural or practical to ask their Marines to teach them how to employ new equipment, so choices are limited on how to mitigate this challenge. Most bases provide refresher training courses that can reintroduce the SNCOs to the equipment, but the most effective way to regain proficiency is by going to the field on a regular basis. Field exercises generally require the setup and tear-

down of tactical networks, so they are the premier opportunity for growth in MOS proficiency. Unrestricted officers are also challenged within the MOS. Unlike many other MOSs, communications officers are not taught and not expected to emulate the MOS skills that their Marines possess. The amount of time it takes to develop those skills across every communications MOS is inordinate and impractical. A platoon commander likely has a strong understanding of how to plan a network and the critical challenges among equipment and personnel, but he probably cannot program a switch, router, or server to function on that network. This supervisory shortfall is amplified when the SNCOs also lack an understanding of the employment of the equipment.

Moreover, like any technical MOS, the culture of the Marines within the ranks is unique. Marines within the communications MOS are extremely intelligent, willing to challenge ideas, and generally find pleasure in operating their equipment in a field environment. The constant training required to remain proficient often prevents these Marines from honing their warfighting skills to the same level. In this setting, unless the commander prioritizes the "whole Marine concept," these skills can atrophy and thereby negatively alter the culture of the unit.