

OPERATIONAL LEADER'S FIELD GUIDE

*Decision,
Adaptation
and Performance
in Complex
Incidents*

JAYSON COIL

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LUDENDORFF BRIDGE · REMAGEN, GERMANY

The last intact span over the Rhine on March 7, 1945. American forces captured the bridge through the improvised initiative of a single lieutenant whose operations order did not authorize the crossing.

No operations order had told Lieutenant Karl Timmermann to cross the Rhine on March 7, 1945. The detailed plan called for a deliberate, prepared crossing elsewhere, days later, with different units. What Timmermann had was intent: reach the Rhine, cross it, take the war to Germany. When he found the Ludendorff Bridge damaged but passable, he made a decision no operations order had authorized. His platoon crossed under fire. Within hours the 9th Armored Division was on the east bank; within days, thousands of troops were pouring across. No one above Timmermann countermanded him. They accelerated what he had begun. Mission command is not permission to act without a plan. It is the discipline of understanding the plan well enough to know when the plan is wrong.

01

CHAPTER ONE

DECENTRALIZED EXECUTION & MISSION COMMAND

Mission command is not a management technique. It is not a leadership style you select from a menu. It is not “empowerment” as the term is used in corporate retreats, and it is not the absence of control. Mission command is a philosophy of command — a deliberate structural choice about where decisions are made, how authority is distributed, and what the relationship between a commander and subordinate leaders must look like for an organization to function in complex, dynamic environments.

At its core, mission command combines centralized intent with decentralized execution. The commander defines the end state, the purpose, and the constraints. Subordinate leaders decide how to achieve that end state within those constraints, using their own judgment, adapting to conditions as they find them — not as the plan assumed they would be.

This is not pushing decisions down to the lowest level. It is pushing decisions to the right level — the level where the person with the most

complete picture of the situation makes the call. In a wildfire environment, the division supervisor standing on the ridge with smoke in three directions and a wind shift building has a more complete picture of that piece of the problem than the operations section chief in the ICP. The OSC has a more complete picture of the operational strategy than the division supervisor. Mission command ensures each leader makes the decisions appropriate to their level — and trusts the other to do the same.

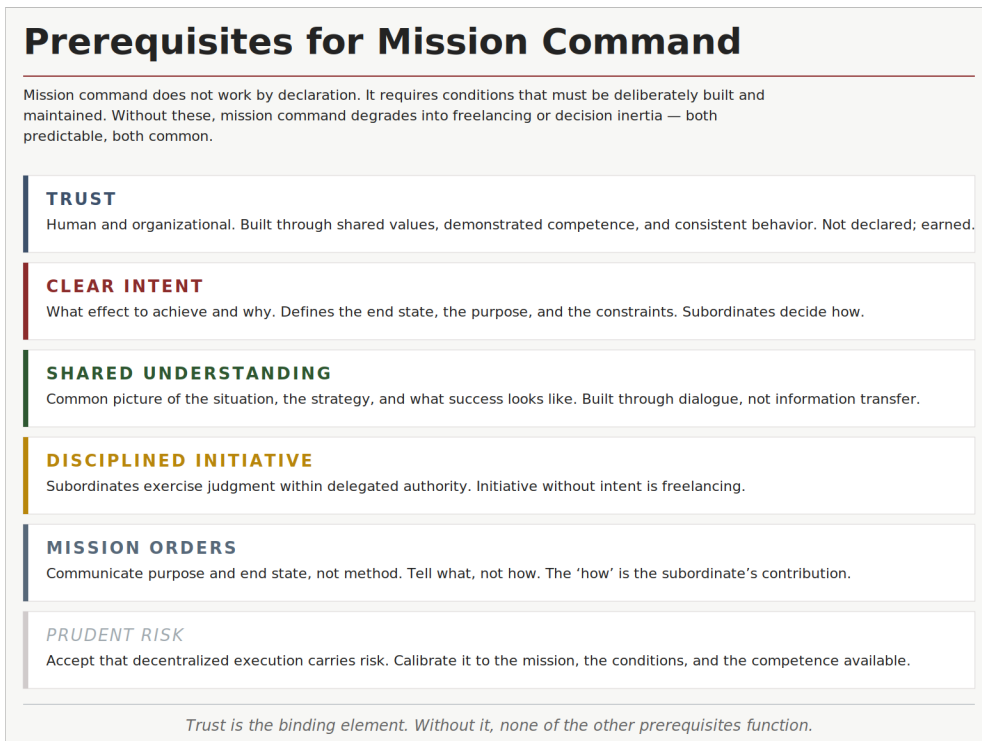


Figure 5 Prerequisites for Effective Mission Command (adapted from ADP 6-0, Mission Command, 2019; Bungay, The Art of Action, 2011).

The Prerequisites

What must be true before mission command works.

Mission command does not work by declaration. You cannot announce it and expect it to appear. It requires conditions that must be deliberately built and maintained (Figure 5). If these conditions are absent, mission command degrades into one of two failure modes: either leaders at lower

levels make independent decisions that diverge from the strategy (freelancing), or they default to waiting for direction because they do not trust the system to support them when they act (decision inertia). Both are common. Both are predictable. Both result from the same root cause—the prerequisites were not in place.

THE TRUST MISSION COMMAND REQUIRES IS NOT DECLARED INTO EXISTENCE

Six agencies functioning as one unit does not happen with a memo. The personnel realignments establishing the U.S. Wildland Fire Service can be issued in a day. The trust between an Agency Administrator and a Bureau Representative who must now co-sign Leader's Intent on a Type 1 incident is built over months of working contact, observed performance, and the small reps that calibrate mutual confidence under stress.

That trust has not yet been built in many places. It must be built deliberately and in lower-stakes settings before fire-decision tempo tests it under load. Leaders at every level of the new structure can do this work now — in cooperator meetings, in tabletop exercises, in joint planning sessions, in shared training — or they can discover the gap on the incident. The principle holds: mission command does not work by declaration. It rests on conditions that must be deliberately built.

Trust

Trust is the binding element. Without it, nothing else in this chapter functions. Trust operates in two dimensions — human and organizational. The human dimension of trust is built on shared values, demonstrated competence, and consistent behavior over time. When subordinates trust their leaders, they are willing to follow and trust in their actions. When leaders trust their subordinates, they delegate authority and accept the inherent risk that decentralized execution always carries. This trust is not blind. It is earned through repeated demonstration that the other person's judgment is sound, their character is reliable, and their commitment to the mission is genuine.

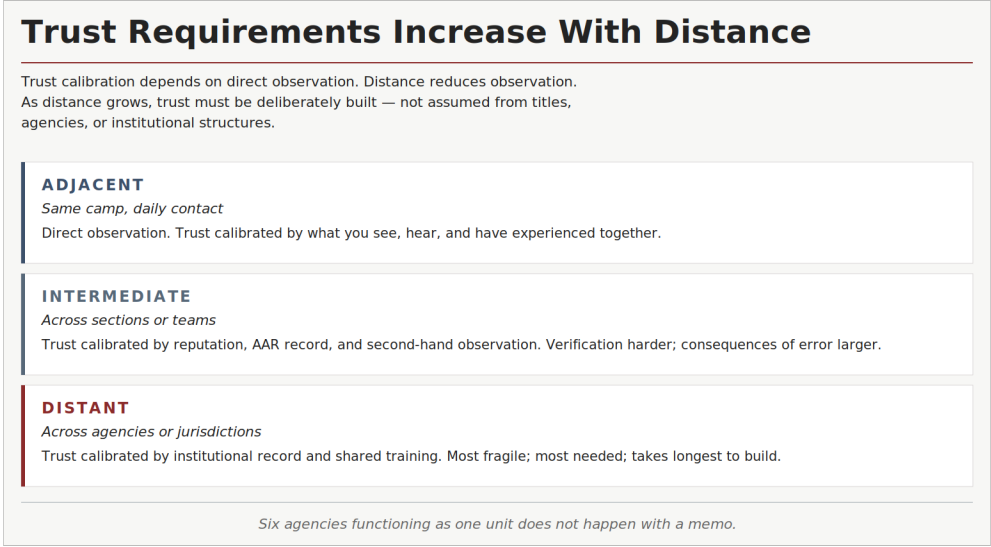


Figure 6 The Trust Required — Behavioral Indicators (original, Coil, 2026).

The Trust Mission Command Requires Is Not Declared Into Existence

The organizational dimension of trust is built through esprit de corps — the extent to which members feel obligated to the organization, its goals, its leaders, and each other. Research consistently shows that organizations with high levels of intraorganizational trust not only perform better but also show higher levels of cohesion and resilience. This trust is not produced by writing values on walls or sending emails about culture. It is produced by leaders whose actions match their words. There is no workaround.

Trust takes time to build and can be destroyed in a single act. A leader who says they trust their subordinates but overrides field decisions without explanation is teaching the organization that trust is conditional and unreliable. A subordinate who exercises initiative but fails to communicate the change is teaching leadership that delegation is dangerous. Both destroy the conditions mission command requires. Trust requirements and the conditions required to develop trust increase with distance (Figure 6).

THE BACK-BRIEF: TESTING WHETHER INTENT HAS LANDED

Why it matters: The brief/back-brief cycle is not a formality. It is how intent gets unpacked into actions at the right level — and how you find misalignment before it becomes field friction.

What to ask for: After you deliver intent, request a back-brief — not a repeat of your words, but the subordinate’s translation of what they are going to do and why.

What to listen for:

- A clear description of the task in their own words.
- A correct understanding of *why* it matters (purpose) and what success looks like (end state).
- Any assumptions or constraints they’re carrying that you didn’t intend.

How to respond to misalignment: If the back-brief reveals a gap, treat it as information about your intent — its clarity, specificity, or framing — not as the subordinate’s failure. Fix the intent *before* they leave the briefing, not after the plan unravels in the field.

Clear Intent

If trust is the foundation, clear intent is the architecture. Intent is what enables autonomy without disorder. It is the mechanism by which a commander can say, “I do not need to tell you how to do this, because you understand what I need accomplished and why it matters.”

The hallmark of a great commander — air, ground, or fire — is the ability to communicate intent effectively. This is a skill that is consistently undervalued and undertrained. Communicating intent requires accuracy, brevity, and clarity. If your intent statement requires a paragraph of explanation before it makes sense, it is not clear. If your division supervisors cannot state your intent in their own words and explain how their actions support it, your intent has not been communicated — it has been transmitted. Transmission is not communication.

Intent must include what you want to achieve (the end state), why it matters (the purpose), and the boundaries within which subordinates can operate (the constraints). It should not include how to achieve it. The moment you prescribe the method, you have converted mission command into directive control and assumed responsibility for the adequacy of that method in conditions you may not fully understand.

Shared Understanding

Shared understanding is not the same as shared information. You can push the same data to every leader on the incident and still have no shared understanding. Shared understanding means that leaders at different levels and in different functions have a common mental model of the situation, the strategy, the priorities, the constraints, and the relationships between their actions and the actions of others. It means that when conditions change, leaders across the organization make compatible decisions — not because they coordinated in real time, but because they understand the intent well enough to converge independently.

Building shared understanding requires more than briefings. It requires dialogue — real, substantive professional conversation where questions are expected, challenges are welcomed, and the goal is collective comprehension, not compliance. When organizations reward compliance rather than initiative, the result is passivity and fear. The intelligence of the organization becomes less than the sum of the intelligence of the people within it. That is a system-level failure, and it begins at the top.

Competence

Mission command cannot function if the people exercising initiative lack the competence to do so effectively. Decentralizing authority to leaders who do not possess the knowledge, judgment, and skills required to make sound decisions under pressure does not produce agility — it produces chaos with distributed authorship.

A Framework for Evaluating Decision Quality

Six diagnostic questions. Designed for AAR, midday assessment, and any conversation where understanding decision soundness matters more than narrating outcomes.

- 01
TEST

Were the objectives clear?
Strategic objectives clearly defined and well-communicated. Resources prioritized accordingly. Vacuum filled by individual interpretation when not.
- 02
TEST

Was the reasoning sound?
Decisions based on available information, risk assessments, and expert judgment — not habit, preference, or anchoring to previous incidents.
- 03
TEST

Were alternatives considered?
Genuine alternatives generated and evaluated. Inquiry, not advocacy. If only one option was on the table, the process was incomplete.
- 04
TEST

Was the decision communicated and executed?
Subordinate leaders understood task, purpose, and end state. Adequate decision space provided. Deviations traced to cause.
- 05
TEST

Did the team adapt?
Reassessment as conditions changed. Iteration based on new information. Adaptability is not a secondary criterion — it is primary.
- 06
TEST

Was it evaluated on process or outcome?
Calibrated language. Process failures separated from external factors. Good outcomes scrutinized as hard as bad ones.

*The standard is not that every decision succeeds.
The standard is that every decision can withstand honest scrutiny.*

Figure 43 A Framework for Evaluating Decision Quality (original, Coil, 2026).

Was the Decision Communicated and Executed? Were decisions communicated clearly enough for subordinate leaders to understand not just the task but the purpose and end state? Were decisions implemented in a timely manner? Was adequate decision space provided to subordinate leaders? When deviations occurred, were they the result of poor execution, resource limitations, or factors beyond control?

Did the Team Adapt? When conditions changed, did the team reassess their decisions and adjust? Did they iterate based on new information, or did they persist with the original plan? Were alternatives explored when initial decisions did not produce expected results? Adaptability is not a secondary consideration in decision quality, it is the primary one.

Was the Decision Evaluated on Process or Outcome? In the post-incident review, was the language reflective of uncertainty or anchored in absolutes? Were process failures separated from external factors? Could the team articulate how they followed their process — not just proclaim that process was followed? Were decisions that produced favorable outcomes examined with the same rigor as decisions that did not? The discipline of evaluating good outcomes is at least as important as evaluating bad ones, because good outcomes can reinforce bad processes.

What This Demands of You

Separating decision quality from outcomes is not natural. It runs counter to how most people think, how most organizations evaluate performance, and how most leaders build their reputations. The leader who made a questionable call that happened to work out gets praised. The leader who made a sound call that was overwhelmed by conditions gets questioned. Changing this requires deliberate, sustained effort at every level.

Evaluate your own decisions on process. After every significant decision, force yourself to articulate the reasoning behind it — independent of the outcome (Figure 43). What did you know? What were you uncertain about? What alternatives did you consider? What assumptions were you making? If you cannot reconstruct the reasoning, the decision was reactive rather than deliberate. That does not make it wrong. But it means you cannot learn from it.

Evaluate your team's decisions on process. When a subordinate leader makes a decision that produces an unfavorable outcome, the first question should be about the process, not the result. What information did they have? What was their understanding of the intent? Did they consider

Communicating Intent That Enables Action

Chapter 1 established that clear intent is the foundation of mission command. This chapter operationalizes it — how to write it, how to communicate it, how to verify it was understood, and how to connect it to the daily planning and execution cycle.

The ITPE Structure

Intent communication follows a proven structure: Intent, Task, Purpose, and End State. Each element serves a distinct function, and the absence of any one degrades the value of the others (Figure 48).

Intent communicates what you are trying to achieve — the overarching goal that should guide all subordinate decisions. Task specifies the actions required. Purpose explains why those actions matter — how they connect to the broader operational and strategic objectives. End State describes what success looks like — the observable condition that indicates the objective has been met.

A task without a purpose is an instruction that cannot be adapted. A purpose without an end state is a direction without a destination. An intent without all three subordinate elements is an aspiration that cannot be executed. The structure exists because each element compensates for the limitations of the others.

Narrative: Making the Future Concrete

ITPE communicates the structure of intent. Narrative communicates its texture. The two are complementary, not redundant. A leader who delivers task, purpose, and end state has communicated what to do, why it matters, and what success looks like. A leader who pairs that with a brief, concrete description of the future being built — or the future being prevented — has communicated something the receiver will remember when the structure of the briefing has faded.

Narrative is not motivational language. It is a sense-making tool. Human beings retain stories more reliably than they retain instructions, and they apply stories more flexibly under pressure. The division supervisor who has been told “hold Division Alpha” has an instruction. The division supervisor who has been told “hold Division Alpha — if it fails, the fire enters the wildland-urban interface south of the highway and the values at risk shift from forest to homes, and we are no longer running the operation we briefed this morning” has a picture. The picture survives the conditions in which the instruction would erode.

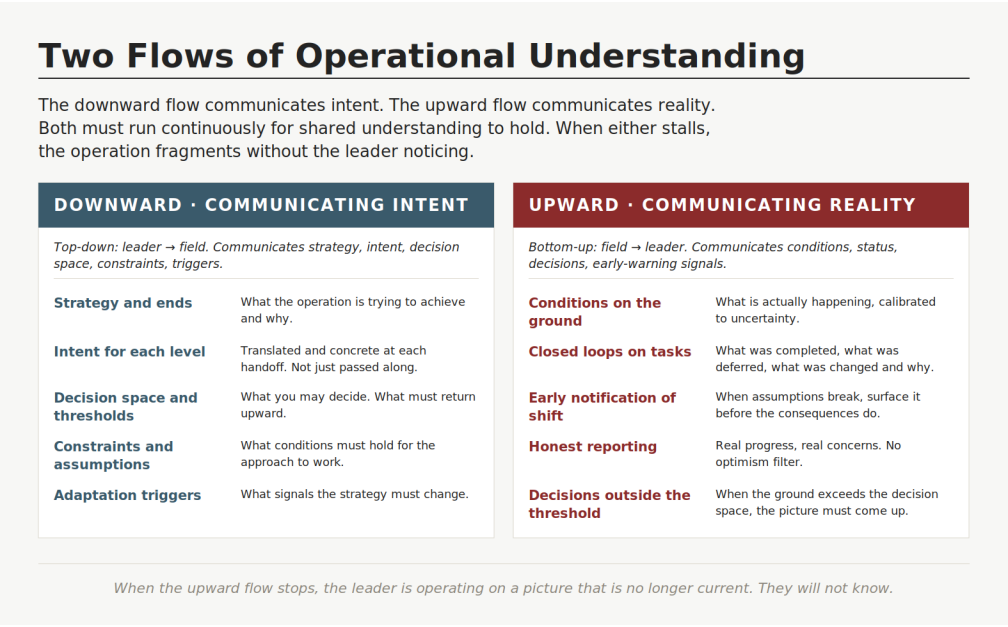


Figure 49 Two Flows of Operational Understanding (original, Coil, 2026).

Narrative serves four functions in operational leadership.

It makes the desired end state concrete. “Containment by Friday” is a measurable goal. “By Friday, we have a defensible perimeter that holds through the weekend wind event, residents are back in their homes, and the team can transition to a smaller organization for mop-up and patrol” is a future the team can see. The first is a metric. The second is a destination.

It makes failure consequences concrete. A team that has heard the leader describe what failure looks like — specifically, in the terms the public, the

cooperators, and the affected community would experience it — operates with a different sense of what is at stake than a team that has only heard “we cannot let this fail.” The difference is not motivational. It is informational. The team knows what the leader is actually trying to prevent, which sharpens every subsequent decision.

It surfaces unstated assumptions. A leader who tries to narrate the future state and finds it difficult to do so concretely has identified a gap in their own thinking. The narrative cannot be told because the picture has not been formed. This is diagnostic. The exercise of trying to describe the future in concrete terms forces the precision that abstract intent does not require.

It connects the work to the people the work serves. Operational leaders sometimes lose sight of the fact that the public, the homeowners, the businesses, and the communities affected by the incident are the reason the work matters. Narrative that includes the human consequences of success and failure keeps that connection visible. The team that knows what success looks like for the affected community operates differently than the team that has only been given operational objectives.

These four functions describe the two flows of operational understanding (Figure 49) — the structural flow that ITPE delivers and the textural flow that narrative carries.

How to Use Narrative Without Inflating It

Narrative is a discipline, not an indulgence. Three guidelines keep it useful.

Keep it short. Two or three sentences after the ITPE delivery is sufficient. Long narratives become speeches, and speeches dilute the structural elements they were meant to reinforce.

Keep it concrete. Specific places, specific people, specific consequences. Abstract narrative is indistinguishable from rhetoric. The point is to give the receiver a picture they can hold.

Keep it honest. Narrative that overstates the consequences of success or failure is a credibility liability. The leader who routinely describes routine