

The Reason “Why” We Will Win

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The purpose of this article is to stimulate discussion and thought concerning how we, as tactical leaders, can position ourselves to win in combat by applying a way of thinking that exploits opportunities on a changing battlefield. We have sought to use a practical approach, in the hope that any benefit gained from reading this article may be put to use quickly.

It is no secret that some units achieve relatively little success in terms of engagements and battles against the OPFOR at the Combat Training Centers. Units that do succeed have, as a characteristic, a sense of purpose. We contend that there is a direct relationship between battlefield success and a unit's understanding of purpose orientation and its benefits in planning and executing combat operations. Units have shown a propensity to fight according to plan. This tendency might suffice if combat was an orderly, logical pursuit. Unfortunately, “command-by-plan inherently fights the disorderly nature of war as much as the adversary. It is a futile quest to will order upon chaos.”¹ Strict adherence to the best plan becomes a recipe for failure when pursued vigorously without accounting for a changing environment. Our question is, “How can we become more flexible, better positioned to exploit opportunities as they arise on the battlefield, while retaining the initiative and imposing our will on the enemy?”

Take the example of the company commander in the hatch of his tank during a battle (Figure 1). He is commanding the advance guard company during a movement to contact. The S3 has provided him with a support-by-fire position on the operations overlay and has tasked him to fix the forward security element of the advancing divisional forward detachment (a motorized rifle battalion). During the task force rehearsal, the task force commander reiterated numerous times the importance of this company commander's mission. “Occupy the support-by-fire position as rapidly as pos-

sible to fix the forward security element. I will maneuver the battalion to assail the southern flank of the enemy advance guard main body.” In the morning, the company commander crossed the LD ahead of the task force by about 2 kilometers. As the company moved along its assigned axis, things were going smoothly, just as planned. The S3 called for a SITREP, wanting to know how long it would be until the company was in its assigned support-by-fire position. Simultaneously, the task force main body began receiving artillery fires as it crossed the LD. The TF commander ordered the TF to move rapidly across the LD and deploy into its planned formation. The S3 called again to the advance guard company commander, emphasizing that he had to get to the SBF position quickly. The company commander then admonished his leaders to “move out — let's get to the SBF!” So the company did. Once there, the company commander verified his location using his position locator. Indeed he was at the SBF depicted on the operations overlay. His fields of fire were unlimited. He re-

ported this to the TF commander. Then it happened. Direct fire began pouring in on the company from its northern flank. The company commander had been concerned about that intervisibility line on the right at about 2000 meters. The contact report went up to the TF commander, who immediately set in motion the gears to get the TF moving to the south of the advance guard company and into the flank of the enemy advance guard main body, just as planned. At this point, the lead company commander is in the fight of his life, attempting to reorient his company to face the threat coming from the north. Unfortunately, there is no terrain to tie in to, and he begins to lose combat power. Command and control is a mess. The net becomes clogged with platoon leaders trying to inform him of what is happening. Within four minutes, the FSE destroys the company. The rest of the battalion is still moving forward, through predetermined checkpoints, to assail the enemy flank. As they begin to wheel to the north as planned, knowing that is where the enemy is — as reported by the advance guard com-

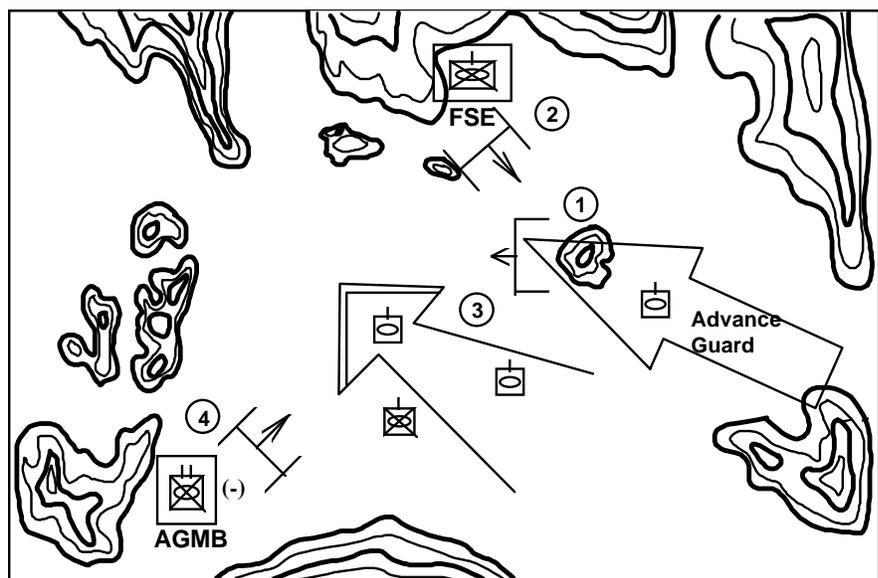


Figure 1

pany commander — the TF receives fire from the left flank (west). It is the southern MRC of the AGMB. The TF commander orders his left flank company/team to provide a base of fire while the TF attempts to maneuver back to the west and around the enemy. As the TF turns back to the west, it receives fire from the northern MRC of the AGMB, which is occupying defensible terrain directly to the front of the TF. The company/team in the lead at this point returns fire but is having a hard time picking out targets through the dust. The trail company/team begins taking AT fire from the rear. It's the FSE, still located in the position from which it destroyed the advance guard company. The battalion is dead.

The plan had detail, with graphic control measures painstakingly applied to aid in control. Rehearsals confirmed that everyone knew what they had to do and where they had to go. The advance guard company moved rapidly to gain contact. The TF moved aggressively once in contact, ensuring maintenance of initiative. What went wrong? Everything.

This unit knew the plan and believed in it. That became its undoing. The graphic control measures meant as an enhancement to command and control became an end in themselves, with the advance guard company focused on what turned out to be an untenable position. Rather than focusing on why they had to fix the FSE, which would have been their purpose, they focused on the support by fire position itself and what they were planning to do when they got there. Pursuit of purpose did not occur; only the task of support by fire received attention. Not once during the fight was the company commander asked about his progress in achieving his purpose. What was his purpose? It received little attention during the rehearsal, and was not written into the task force operations order. The inputs of terrain and enemy had little impact on the company commander until it was too late. Too late to modify his given task. Too late to maneuver his company. Too late to achieve his purpose. Too late for the TF commander to make a good decision.

The rest of the TF then threw good money after bad. With their maneuver firmly fixed in their minds, they acted according to plan. At that point the enemy clearly had the initiative, and the TF was merely reacting. Poor actions

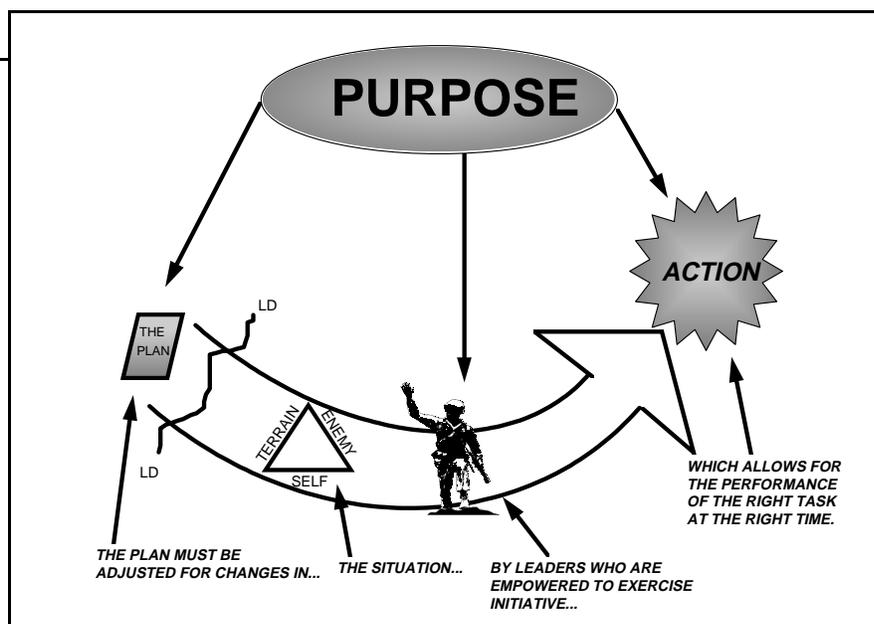


Figure 2

on contact led to a loss of initiative, and ultimately, to the loss of the fight.

It is understood that there are many tactics, techniques, and procedures that can improve to prevent scenarios such as this from occurring. Obviously, the training of our units in basic battle drills and gunnery helps us to survive unexpected contact. This fact almost goes without saying, since it has been the hallmark of all good units. But that is only half the picture. The answer does not lie exclusively in conducting battlefield activities well. Instead, the rest of the answer lies in why we are on the battlefield in the first place!

Purpose and Its Role

Webster's 9th New Collegiate Dictionary defines purpose as an "end to be obtained." This is nothing more than the "why" of the mission statement. The purpose of the operation should always drive the way we think. This holds true from both a planning and an execution perspective. This is the notion of "purpose orientation," or thinking, planning, and acting with a definite purpose in mind (Figure 2). While we may have subordinates who can execute assigned tactical tasks well, unless guided by a purpose they are hostages of those tasks. In a changing battlefield environment, they will execute the wrong task in the wrong place at the wrong time extremely well.

It seems simple that the "why" justifies the tactical tasks we plan and perform. Apparently, in many cases, exactly the opposite is true. Observations

indicate that process and tactical tasks become the driving factors in planning and execution, respectively. We should replace this paradigm with one in which the focus is on an overriding purpose. Purpose orientation empowers subordinates to re-task themselves, which enhances maneuver, adds simplicity, and ultimately leads to success. Unfortunately, purpose usually languishes in the mission statement or on the pages of numerous manuals. The problem is that purpose — usually treated as purely an intellectual notion — sometimes has little linkage to how we plan and execute combat operations. It is not surprising that articulation of purpose does not receive emphasis, since purpose is rarely leveraged to the degree required by rapidly changing combat situations.

Purpose in History

History reinforces the fact that we need purpose, and indeed require it to ensure success. The first example would be the one provided by the German army. Their concept of "auftragstaktik" or mission orders, parallels what we term "purpose orientation." The Prussians in the 1700s recognized that successful combat requires freedom of action and initiative. Hesitating to gain time to make a decision was unacceptable. The Prussians leveraged this way of thinking into battlefield success numerous times during the 18th and 19th centuries.

The second edition of *Infantry in Battle*,² quotes Napoleon as saying, "Bat-

tles of which one cannot say why they are fought and with what purpose, are the usual resource of ignorance.” Also from the same book: “In every operation there must run from the highest to the lowest unit the sturdy lifeline of a guiding idea; from this will be spun the intricate web that binds an army into an invincible unit embodying a single thought and a single goal.” This “guiding idea” is nothing other than purpose.

History gives us numerous examples of commanders using this “guiding idea” or purpose orientation to “re-task” themselves. BG John Buford is one such commander who had the willingness and ability to act. His classic delay in sector on the field at Gettysburg occurred because of purpose orientation. His division of cavalry posted astride the Chambersburg Pike on July 1, 1863, was a result of re-tasking due to changes in the terrain, enemy, and friendly forces. Buford’s appreciation of the terrain around Gettysburg and his understanding of the movements of the Southern army are well-documented. He used this knowledge, coupled with that about changes in Union infantry locations, to re-task himself to block Confederate movement and allow the Union army to concentrate around the defensible terrain at Gettysburg. Notice that the technical ability of Buford provided the ability to act, but the willingness came from his understanding of the unique contribution that only his 1st Cavalry Division made to the overall commander’s concept. His mission was to allow the Army of the Potomac to group together. BG Buford changed the task that would achieve this purpose, as well as the location of its performance.

Purpose and Force XXI

If a sense of purpose proved to be a characteristic of good leaders and units in the past, then the present and the future makes this trait an absolute requirement. A Third Wave³ (Force XXI) army undergoes a bombardment of information which, if properly managed, will empower leaders with an unprecedented, real-time view of the battlefield. This information audience includes leaders at all levels, not only those at the upper echelons. Purpose, and its articulation, takes on even more meaning. As we become smaller, while being required to operate across the entire spectrum of conflict, the opportunities for us to exploit battlefield situ-

ations become more numerous. Our leaders must exercise initiative to exploit opportunities, guided by the commander’s intent, only secondarily dependent on technology.⁴ A sense of purpose, given the battlefield environment, defines for us what we should do in terms of tactical tasks. Force XXI requires that we institutionalize a way of thinking whereby the benefits of information dominance are apparent at all echelons of command. Simply put, our level of technology demands that even more flexibility (through articulation of purpose) be embodied in planning and execution. The result is a dynamic and dominating maneuver which is presently, and will continue to be, required of Third Wave thinkers.

Purpose in Planning

In the planning of combat operations, purpose orientation allows the planner to start with and maintain an orderly, logical approach to formulating a possible plan to accomplish the assigned mission. The mission, by definition, includes task and purpose. It would seem that the next step is easy — take the purpose found in the mission statement, choose a decisive point, and start developing a course of action. Unfortunately, many times the “purpose” in the mission statement is not really a purpose at all. Instead, it is usually just another tactical task, couched in terms that make it seem palatable. An example at the battalion level would be, “TF 1-91 attacks NLT 090600SEP96 to destroy an enemy MRC(ES675453) and seize Objective Ford (ES660470).” At the company/team level, a mission statement might sound like this: “Team Animal occupies support by fire position A1 NLT 090600SEP96 to fix enemy MRP on Objective Gold (ES670450).” The battalion level example is a statement of the type of operation and a tactical task, followed by another tactical task, with no purpose. The company/team example is a statement of a tactical task with no purpose. They seem acceptable though, since the first action leads to the achievement of the second. Thus begins the vicious circle of “task orientation.” Focus shifts purely to the assigned tactical task, achievement of the task defines success, the plan loses flexibility, and initiative loses its true value. What would happen in the battalion example if destruction of the MRC or seizure of the objective, due to changes in the situ-

ation, no longer remains as a viable or logical task? Without a purpose being articulated, the unit cannot react to that eventuality. If, however, the mission statement read something like, “TF 1-91 attacks NLT 090600SEP96 to seize Objective Ford (ES660470) to create maneuver space for TF 2-74 (BDE main effort),” then, regardless of changes in the situation, the leaders of TF 1-91 know that any task they perform must in a clear way support, either directly or indirectly, the creation of maneuver space for TF 2-74. Tactical tasks determined from our planning may be fleeting when examined in the light of battlefield realities. Purpose, however, is far less transitory.

FM 101-5-1 and other doctrinal literature are sources for possible tactical tasks. Examples of how to write the purpose portion of the mission statement are hard to find in any manual. This creates problems. Our inability to articulate the purpose of an operation, since purpose does not follow any formula, becomes the stumbling block. Relief is in sight, however. The planner has only to ask the question, “Why is a force needed?” The reason “why” should begin with an operative word such as create, allow, enable, protect, or prevent. These examples are not all-inclusive. The only limitation in developing ways to articulate purpose is the planner’s imagination. These operative words provide a natural transition between the task and the purpose and, in their use, give primacy to purpose. In this manner, flexibility exists in the plan. Consequently, subordinates are in a position to exercise meaningful initiative, not just tenaciously pursue an assigned task.

Purpose in Execution

Planning with a purpose provides great benefits in execution. Often overlooked is the flexibility that is consequently “built-in” to the plan. The true beauty of purpose is what it enables us to do on the battlefield. Commanders cannot afford a force shackled to a plan that does not provide the best solution to the tactical problem. The reason for this is that the plan uses estimates. What occurs after the LD is reality. Our actions should reflect these realities of the battlefield environment, not the estimate. Although reconnaissance lessens the gap between estimates and reality, rarely can we account for all the possible mutations of the battlefield en-

vironment. These mutations, or changes in the battlefield environment (situation) occur in three distinct areas; terrain, enemy, and self.

First, terrain changes in terms of our appreciation of its effects. Once we are physically on the ground, our vision of the terrain may change markedly from the usually map-based vision that we utilized in planning. Remember the company commander in the story. The SBF position, although planned with the best intentions, did not reflect the realities of the terrain. The contour intervals on our maps limit us in this respect. Given a 20-meter contour interval, a 60-65 foot rise may not show up significantly on the map. The effect is profound if we cannot adjust once on the ground. Second, the enemy may change in terms of its composition and disposition, as well as course of action adopted. Third, our own status or vision of self can undergo significant changes in terms of combat power, relative positioning of units, and overall effectiveness. With all these possible changes occurring on the battlefield, there is one constant upon which to base our actions: the purpose of the operation. Purpose orientation creates a force that can rapidly exploit a changing situation, executing the appropriate tactical task, subordinated to the operation's overall purpose.

One example of this is the commander who senses the changes in the situation and utilizes his initiative to perform the task that the situation requires. Instead of destroying an MRP, given the existing situation, maybe suppressing it will suffice, justification being provided by achievement of the purpose, not execution of a planned tactical task. The opposite would be the well-meaning commander who, given his assigned tactical task, doggedly pursues it to the end, at the expense of men and equipment with no regard for a higher purpose. **Destroying an enemy force may be important, but relative to the reason why, it may not be most important.**

Purpose and Initiative

In order for purpose orientation to be leveraged to its fullest possible extent, there must be a linkage to leader initiative. Initiative has two distinct components, according to FM 100-5. Ability and willingness to act are the ingredients that determine the level of success

that a unit will enjoy while using purpose orientation. Specifically, subordinate leader initiative (ability component) will not exist if he is not well-trained, or his commander has not underwritten his mistakes in training. Empowerment of the subordinate (willingness component) comes by way of the purpose that his superior articulates. This enables him, in the absence of guidance, to deviate from the initially assigned tactical task in order to take full advantage of the situation at hand. This means that mutual trust must exist between higher and lower. Failure to develop this environment will result in subordinates with the ability to exercise battlefield initiative, but unwilling to do so out of fear that his actions might disrupt the plan. This fear need not be real to inhibit subordinate initiative; all it takes is the *perception* of an inflexible command environment to abruptly end all opportunities for battlefield initiative. Clearly, subordinates must *possess* initiative while superiors must *allow* it.

We must recognize that initiative is a double-edged sword. Certainly, the subordinate must maintain excellent situational awareness (terrain, enemy, self) in order to execute the appropriate task. If not, he becomes a loose cannon, detrimental to the accomplishment of the higher mission, and a possible cause of fratricide. He must always understand the nuances of terrain and its effects on both the enemy and himself. He must understand how the Threat fights and be able to read the battlefield indicators pointing to certain Threat courses of action. He must have a good understanding of the locations and actions of units around him so as to not interfere with their efforts. He must understand his relationship to the main effort and how his actions should enhance the success of it. Finally, he must always operate within the framework of the commander's intent. This allows the higher commander to achieve and maintain a unity of effort across his command.

The flexibility provided to the subordinate in terms of his power to conduct the task he deems appropriate, given the current situation, comes at a price. It is his duty to maintain increased situational awareness, fully understand the purposes of his higher and adjacent units, and keep his higher commander informed. The Army of today and tomorrow requires that this mutual trust

exists. This trust, embodied and strengthened in training, will lead to battlefield success.

Purpose at All Levels of Command

Purpose provides the common thread between all units and all echelons. Purpose orientation must be systemic. If it does not exist at every level, the chain breaks, unity of effort diminishes, and task orientation results. Each subordinate unit must know the unique end to obtain while each commander must clearly articulate purpose to those below him.

It is difficult for well-intentioned leaders to work in a vacuum created by the inability of their next higher level of command to tell them why they must perform a combat action. Likewise, articulating purpose becomes an exercise in futility if subordinates do not embody it in their plan or use it to guide their actions. Purpose must be a central theme at all levels of command in order to reap its benefits at any level.

The current intellectual levels of our subordinates, as well as the integration of information technology, makes articulation of a reason for our actions critical. If we do not, we will end up attempting to give prescriptive directions to account for every twist and turn on the battlefield. The increased speed at which information becomes available will overmatch our ability to make decisions and give instructions. The best information is that collected by the man in contact. The best action is the action that the man in contact decides upon, while guided by the reason for the operation. The influence of purpose at this point — actions on contact — is absolutely critical.

Arguably, the need for a common understanding of purpose and what it does for us at all levels of command is the most important aspect of purpose orientation. Purpose orientation is difficult to achieve across an entire unit because leaders have different repetitive experience levels, different interpretations of doctrine, and different opinions. The fact that this way of thinking, although embodied in our doctrine, is not readily apparent or accepted by many, further complicates matters. For this reason, purpose orientation remains the responsibility of the commander. He is the one who articulates purpose to his subordinates through his intent.

He is the one who must be purpose orientation's biggest fan. Only through his acceptance and insistence on the "life-line of a guiding idea" can his subordinates and indeed his entire unit achieve success on the battlefield.

Conclusion

As stated earlier, the purpose of this article is to stimulate discussion and thought. An engine for change can then develop. That engine would include modifications to institutional instruction, training, and leader development. To fully capitalize on the capabilities of the current and future force, we must leverage the flexibility that purpose orientation provides. Old paradigms of process-oriented staffs, task-oriented units, and Second Wave (mass production) thinking will give way to situationally oriented staffs, purpose-oriented units, and Third Wave thinking. The current world order requires this customization of thinking to be our hallmark. Consequently, one of our most valued assets is "the reason why."

Notes

¹"Command and Control at the Crossroads" by Thomas J. Czerwinski in *Parameters*, Autumn 1996, p. 124.

²*Infantry in Battle*, 2d edition, by the Military History and Publications Section of the Infantry School, 1939.

³The Third Wave is a concept developed by futurists Alvin and Heide Toffler. It describes the current information revolution. The Tofflers have also related Third Wave economic development to Third Wave war, in which information and customization are fundamental.

⁴"Command and Control at the Crossroads," p. 126.

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