

THE PRINCIPLES OF MISSION COMMAND

Though applicable to all aspects of service, the principles of mission command dictate the **actions** required of commanders and Airmen responsible for the application of a mission command philosophy in the conduct of operations. The principles are to **provide clear commander's intent, create shared understanding, exercise disciplined initiative, build teams through mutual trust, accept prudent risk, and use MTOs when appropriate.**

These principles must be ingrained in Service culture. They must permeate the Service's identity and shape how Airmen view themselves and airpower's role in achieving our nation's military and national security objectives. For success in future conflicts, it is imperative that leaders at all levels across the Service inculcate these principles into leadership and command philosophies. Though operationally focused, they must shape, inform, and guide action and thought in all Service endeavors.

PROVIDE CLEAR COMMANDER'S INTENT

Commander's intent is a clear and concise statement that frames the operation's purpose, its desired end state, and what must be accomplished—not how—to achieve success. It is nested within higher echelon commander's intent and guidance with an awareness of the larger operational and strategic context. It provides guidance to subordinates outlining expectations, constraints/restraints, risks, and mission purpose. Ideally, commander's intent should be focused on only what the subordinate needs to accomplish their goals. It should not include what the subordinate can figure out on their own. Greater competence and trust enable more concise commander's intent.

Commander's intent is not static. Commanders and subordinates should be mindful of the need for continual feedback and refinement of intent as operations progress. Commanders should anticipate communication challenges in a contested, degraded, or operationally limited environment. Clear, consistent, and thorough communication in advance of operations ensures subordinate flexibility required to adapt when feedback loops are disrupted.

CREATE SHARED UNDERSTANDING

Shared understanding equips commanders at all levels with the insight and foresight needed to make effective decisions and manage associated risks. Shared understanding includes a common awareness and comprehension of the operational environment, the organization's competence, the limits of its organic capabilities, and its ability to accomplish the mission. Commanders should ensure all participants under their control understand the mission, their capabilities, and their role in achieving mission success. Commanders and subordinates are equally responsible for creating shared understanding. Clear communication and timely two-way feedback ensure accurate shared understanding despite the challenges inherent in dynamic and volatile operational environments.

EXERCISE DISCIPLINED INITIATIVE

Disciplined initiative is the proactive application of inventiveness and creativity when existing orders no longer fit the situation or when unforeseen threats or opportunities arise. It must be informed by a shared understanding of mission objectives, desired effects, overall commander's intent, and the broader operational and strategic context. **Empowering subordinates to exercise disciplined initiative, informed by shared understanding, allows Airmen to operate with greater freedom while still enabling the high-level of coordination and synchronization required to employ airpower.** Exercising disciplined initiative requires competent, empowered Airmen who continually seek a shared understanding of their environment and their place in the operational and strategic context.

Exercising disciplined initiative provides rigidity within commander's intent, yet retains flexibility and responsiveness required to gain operational and tactical advantage in an adverse environment. Commander's intent outlines the parameters and boundaries under which a subordinate may operate. Within those boundaries, the empowered subordinate executes actions to achieve the goals of that mission. This freedom is not given lightly and requires subordinates to be competent, capable, and possess a thorough understanding of the operational environment.

BUILD TEAMS THROUGH MUTUAL TRUST

Mutual trust is shared confidence between commanders, subordinates, and partners that demonstrates reliability and competence to carry out the mission. Importantly, trust cannot be dictated; it must be earned and built over time through shared experiences. Competence and integrity are the bedrock of trust. Shared experiences that showcase these traits build confidence between commanders, subordinates, and partners. Failure on its own cannot be the nemesis of trust. However, leaders should recognize that incompetence, dishonesty, and pridefulness quickly erode trust.

Effective teams do not form spontaneously; they develop through deliberate effort. Commanders and leaders should act proactively to create opportunities conducive to the construction of team building and the establishment of trust between team members. Trust requires leaders to place an emphasis on the team, on internal and external collaboration, and on fostering an unwavering dedication to team values and principles.

ACCEPT PRUDENT RISK

All military operations contain uncertain, complex, ambiguous, and often volatile elements. The complexity of the operational environment and the imperative to delegate authority demands skillful risk assessment. Commanders must analyze risks in collaboration with their subordinates to balance the tension between protecting the force and accepting and managing the risks inherent in mission accomplishment.

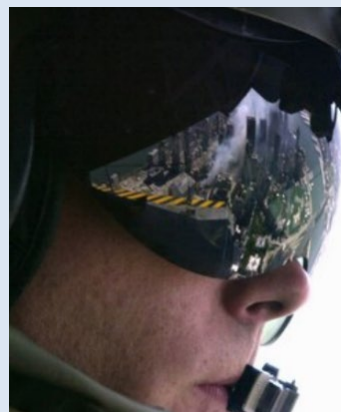
Risk tolerance is a derivative of competence. The ability to assess and mitigate risk increases through training, mentoring, education, and experience. It is imperative for leaders to build and strengthen their own abilities and that of their subordinates charged with executing the mission.

Determining whether risk is prudent or not requires an awareness of the wider strategic and operational environment and a thorough understanding of the associated rewards or payoffs related to the proposed course of action. Even a minor risk may be unacceptable for a reward of questionable value. However, an extreme risk may be tolerable or required to achieve vital tactical, operational, or strategic objectives.

Lastly, as the nature of risk varies at each echelon of command, it is important for commanders to accurately communicate what constitutes risk at their level. Failure to do so may lead a subordinate to mistakenly accept unwarranted risk with wider, strategic consequences not discernable at their level. Subordinate levels of leadership have a responsibility to frequently balance and communicate risk related to the actions being taken. Open lines of communication through all levels are directly tied to the success of creating a shared understanding.

“Go Help Americans”

Following flight operations the night of 10 September 2001, Lieutenant General (ret.) Marshall “Brad” Webb, then a Lieutenant Colonel and 20th Special Operations Squadron’s operations officer, awoke to the news of ongoing terrorist attacks. On temporary duty with seven MH-53 PAVE LOW helicopters at locations on the eastern seaboard, Lt Col Webb immediately called the command post at Hurlburt Field, Florida for guidance. He was directed to “get his aircraft airborne as soon as possible and fly to McGuire AFB, New Jersey” and report to 21st Air Force. For the next seven days, Webb and his crews acted strictly on verbal orders from the AF/DO passed through the 21st Air Force chain of command--three simple words--“**go help Americans!**”



Understanding his brief, but unequivocally clear commander’s intent, Webb and his crews began flying life-saving missions into ground zero at the World Trade Center and the Pentagon without requiring nor requesting additional guidance from higher headquarters. In coordination with the Federal Emergency Management Agency’s urban search and rescue task forces, Webb’s crews flew almost non-stop to support medical teams and rescue operations, often into areas where residual dust and concrete particulates in the air prevented the flight of police and civilian helicopters. Though extremely fatigued and dogged by numerous challenges, they overcame adversity, performed their mission, and achieved commander’s intent. The actions of Lt Col Webb and his crews exemplify mission command.

--Derived from: Darrell D. Whitcomb. “On a Steel Horse I Ride: A History of the MH-53 Pave Low Helicopters in War and Peace,” Air University Press.