

COMMANDER'S INTENT

PUTTING FAST, DELEGATED
DECISION-MAKING AT THE
CORE OF HIGH PERFORMANCE

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OVERVIEW

COMMANDER'S INTENT IS A HIGH PERFORMANCE CONCEPT, PERFECTED BY THE MILITARY, THAT PROMOTES FAST, EFFECTIVE, DELEGATED PLANNING AND DECISION-MAKING. WE EXPLORE THIS APPROACH, ITS IMPLEMENTATION AND ITS APPLICATION IN BUSINESS AS AN ENABLER OF ENDURING ADVANTAGE.

'Plans are nothing, planning is everything.'
General Dwight D. Eisenhower,
34th President of the United States and WW II army general

'No strategy survives contact with the enemy.'
General von Moltke,
19th-century Prussian military strategist

'If you don't know where you're going, any road will take you there.'
The Cheshire Cat,
Alice in Wonderland, Lewis Carroll

How do high performance organisations address these competing truisms to deliver enduring competitive advantage? One concept we can borrow from the world of the military is that of Commander's Intent as designed and perfected by the US Marines. We observed Marine Corps recruits being trained in this strategy at first hand during our research visit to their iconic Parris Island training base.

OVERVIEW OF COMMANDER'S INTENT

For any given mission, the Commander's Intent describes the desired end state at the mission's conclusion. It's a concise expression of the mission's purpose and target outcome that is explicitly communicated to the Marines at its outset as part of the briefing process.

Once understood, Marines operating in the field – either individually or more often in small groups called fire teams – are empowered (and expected) to adapt their pre-developed plans in real-time to achieve the Commander's Intent while taking account of their specific, evolving circumstances. As such, Commander's Intent enables a rapid, delegated and contextualised process of planning and decision-making by forces operating at significant organisational (and often geographical) remove from their leaders.

Commander's Intent is practiced across the US military, however it is particularly relevant for the Marine Corps given its unique role as an amphibious, expeditionary task force, that is usually forward-deployed and tasked with forcible entry from the air, land, and sea. The environments into which Marines are deployed are ambiguous and dynamic, not to mention lethally hostile, so it goes without saying that fast, effective strategy and decision-making are absolutely vital for success.



Parris Island Marine Corps recruits in training.

REQUIREMENTS FOR MAKING COMMANDER'S INTENT EFFECTIVE

Part of the appeal of Commander's Intent is its apparent simplicity. In practice, however, establishing fast, delegated planning and decision-making as an organisational capability that drives enduring performance advantage is anything but simple. We would point to four key, must-have requirements for putting the principle of Commander's Intent at the heart of the Marine Corps' high performance model:

1. WHEN STATING THE COMMANDER'S INTENT, LESS (AND CLEARER) IS MORE

Articulating and communicating Commander's Intent is hard. Its statement needs to strike a balance between being comprehensive and, at the same time, *absolutely* clear and unambiguous. It needs to capture and prioritise complimentary objectives (to the extent that these exist) while absolutely avoiding competing ones. Its job is to indicate "True North" in a way that is constant and consistent, and as such to provide a clear reference point for in-the-field decisions. Scenarios whereby Marines in battle situations are left to work out which outcomes are most important (or worse still to independently pursue alternative outcomes) must be avoided at all costs.

2. (REALLY) ENSURE VALUES AND BEHAVIOURAL NORMS ARE EMBEDDED

To the extent that the Commander's Intent specifies the "what" of a particular mission, the Marines' institutional values and behaviours represent the ultimate expression of the "how". As such, these must act both as motivators and as constraints to action. The Marine Corps values of Honor, Courage and Commitment fulfil each of these briefs in an effective way – in particular in the way that they are drilled (literally) and modelled into new recruits from the very start of their training. Indeed "acculturating" new recruits in the Marine Corps values such that these mobilise and guide their every action is the main objective of the Parris Island leadership for the 13-week that these recruits spend in Boot Camp. Having a diverse group of Marines operating in conditions of acute pressure, using codes of values and behaviours that are poorly defined or ingrained, would dilute the power of the collective and be counter-productive to the Commander's Intent being achieved.

3. COMMUNICATE, COMMUNICATE, COMMUNICATE

Marine Corps deployments are collective affairs where success depends on the choreography and interconnection of actions across multiple individuals and groups. With this in mind, Marines are trained to bias towards over-communicating and to ensure, when they take initiative to deviate from the pre-developed plan, that those around them are aware of what they are doing and why. This is both a behavioural and a process point that allows colleagues to adapt their courses of actions such that the group remains acting in concert. It is enabled by their being equipped with multiple means of communication – ranging from sophisticated 2-way radios and video cameras, to simpler hand-signal codes.

4. PLAN AND PRACTICE ALTERNATIVE SCENARIOS

While they go into every mission with an agreed, preferred plan, Marines will also, as part of their preparation, have considered and (time and resources-permitting) practised alternative plans to achieve the Commander's Intent while catering for situations unfolding in different ways. As a result they have a series of "plays" that they have thought through that capture the actions of not only individual fire teams but the co-ordinated actions of the group as a whole. This planning also allows the Marines to develop and test, in practice, the notion of a "Spectrum of Improvisation" whereby teams only adapt those elements of the plan that require adjustment.

COMMANDER'S INTENT IN OTHER ENVIRONMENTS

For all the uniqueness of the Marine Corps context and the acuteness of their resulting planning and decision-making needs, we observe that effective, delegated, in-the-field decision-making is a key high performance capability of every leading institution we have studied. In many instances, the basis for this capability is similar in spirit and design to Commander's Intent as described here, and specifically we would suggest that the decision-making model in place at another of our high performance research studies, Southwest Airlines, was almost identical albeit in a completely different context and using completely different language. Most importantly, each of the four requirements for effective, fast, delegated planning and decision-making as outlined above is visibly in place and ingrained such that this capability is one of the reasons why Southwest stands out from its peers.



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