

COMMANDER'S INTENT

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

James Bowen and Brian MacNeice
Managing Directors, Kotinos Partners

KOTINOS
PARTNERS LIMITED



- “Plans are nothing, planning is everything” said General Dwight D. Eisenhower
- “No strategy survives contact with the enemy” said General von Moltke, the 19th-century Prussian military strategist
- “If you don’t know where you’re going, any road will take you there” – said the Cheshire Cat in Alice in Wonderland

How do High Performance organisations address these competing truisms to deliver enduring competitive advantage? Secondly, what ideas and concepts can we borrow from great organisations to help other aspirants in in these increasingly dynamic, competitive times...



One concept that we can lift 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 concept at first hand during our research visit to their iconic Parris Island training base.

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

Commander’s Intent is then executed in the field by Marines – operating individually or in small groups (called fire teams) – who are empowered to adapt their pre-developed plans in real-time to take account of their specific, evolving circumstances *and* achieve the target outcome. The existence of the Commander’s Intent facilitates a rapid, delegated and contextualised process of planning and decision-making by forces operating at significant organisational (and often geographical) remove from their leadership.

Commander’s Intent exists as a concept across the US military, however it is particularly relevant for the Marine Corps given its unique role as an amphibious, expeditionary task force, typically 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 decision-making is a powerful enabler of success.

Part of the appeal of Commander’s Intent as a concept is its simplicity, however converting the idea of delegated, fast decision-making into a source of enduring organisational advantage is anything but simple in practice. From our discussions and experience observing recruits being trained, we would point to four keys for success:

I. WHEN IT COMES TO COMMANDER’S INTENT, LESS 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) but absolutely avoid competing ones. Situations where troops on the ground are left to figure out which outcomes are most important (or worse still to independently pursue alternative outcomes) are completely counter-productive in a high performance context.

2. COMMUNICATE, COMMUNICATE, COMMUNICATE

Military missions, like missions in business, sport or other fields of endeavour, are collective affairs where success depends on the choreography and interconnection of actions across multiple individuals or groups. With this in mind, Marines are trained to bias towards over-communicating and to ensure, when they taking initiative to deviate from the pre-developed plan, that those around them are aware of what they are doing and the context that caused them to change. This allows their colleagues to also adapt their courses of actions so that whole remains greater than the sum of the parts.

3. PLAN AND PRACTICE ALTERNATIVE SCENARIOS

Building on the above, while the Marines go into every mission with an agreed, preferred plan, they will also, in preparing for the mission, have considered and (time and resources-permitting) practised alternative plans to cater 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 battalion as a whole. This planning also allows them to make put into practice the notion of a “Spectrum of Improvisation” whereby teams only adapt those elements of the plan that require adjustment.

4. (REALLY) EMBED VALUES AND BEHAVIOURAL NORMS

Institutional values and behaviours are the ultimate expression of “how” the Commander’s Intent should be delivered and, as such, they must act as motivators *and constraints* to action. “Acculturating” new recruits in the Marine Corps values of Honor, Courage and Commitment such that they 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.

All of the High Performance institutions we have researched over the years have, as part of their models for enduring success, a concept that enables effective, delegated decision-making in the field. Commander’s Intent is one such powerful concept, developed and perfected by the Marines in in their unique context and for an explicitly military purpose. It clearly has application and relevance in other areas and, done well it offers huge potential for performance improvement. It is, however, anything but easy and done badly it’s adoption could be completely counter-productive. As such, for us it belongs firmly on the list of High Performance concepts for advanced practitioners only...



James Bowen and Brian MacNeice are founders and Managing Directors of Kotinos Partners Limited, a niche advisory firm working to help CEOs and their teams achieve sustained high performance. He is also co-author of “Powerhouse – Insider accounts into the world’s top high-performance organizations”, published in October 2016 by Kogan Page.





© 2019 Kotinos Partners Limited. All rights reserved.

Merrion Buildings, 18-20 Merrion Street, Dublin 2, Ireland
T. +353 (87) 934 2100 E. info@kotinospartners.com

www.kotinospartners.com