

Mission-Driven Culture

By Mark Smith & Don Whitemore

A tsunami of fire closes in on a casino resort in the foothills east of San Diego. A CalFire Battalion Chief, scouting as a field observer along with a sheriff's deputy, arrives on scene to unfolding catastrophe: people are panicking and attempting to evacuate on a narrow, winding road. In the BC's judgment, the 2500 people around the casino will face certain death in their struggle to escape the flames. He orders everyone inside and directs management to lock the doors. When the flame front passes, the BC directs the deputy to go door to door and evacuate to as many homes as possible in the fire's path.

Post-event investigations all agree that together the BC and sheriff's deputy saved thousands of lives that night. Their extraordinary actions were not the result of specific policies or standard operating procedures. They were the result of an organizational culture that fosters adaptability and resilience – a Mission-Driven Culture (MDC).

The Battalion Chief had no positional or delegated authority to take the actions he did, nonetheless, it was the necessary thing to do and it was the right thing to do. The Los Angeles Times agreed: *"In a night where few guesses proved right, [the battalion chief's] gamble paid off. Like a moat, the parking lot and golf course protected the casino as flames raged past."*

Contrast that story with this headline from an incident several years later that sparked community outrage:

'Handcuffed by policy': Fire crews watch man die

About 75 beachgoers could not understand why [city] firefighters and police officers stood idly by and watched the man slowly succumb to the 60-degree water.

"It's horrible," [a witness] said. "How can we let that happen? How can our emergency personnel allow that to happen? I don't get it, I don't understand it."

The [city] Fire Department says budget constraints are preventing it from recertifying its firefighters in land-based water rescues. Without it, the city would be open to liability.

When asked by [the news] if he would enter the water to save a drowning child, [city] Fire Div. Chief [name] said: " Well, if I was off duty I would know what I would do, but I think you're asking me my on-duty response and I would have to stay within our policies and procedures because that's what's required by our department to do."

In one situation, responders over-rode policy and saved thousands of lives. In the other, they followed policy and a 50-year old man spent nearly an hour in the chilly water before drowning in plain sight of those sworn to save him.

Followers are conditioned to follow rules. When they encounter ambiguity, they ask permission to act. Until then, they wait to be told what to do. Rules make sense for things that cannot be delegated or have no value being delegated. When they interfere with doing the right thing, that's a problem. Tragically, accounts of agencies shackled by their own policies are all too common. Initially well intended, these policies become *"Tail Wags Dog"* stories, counterproductive to the organization's mission.

How are we to equip people with the necessary guidance so the *right* action is taken, at the *right* time, and for the *right* reasons? The answer lies not in beefing up current policies, but in shifting culture to value *operators* over *followers*.

MDC consists of a set of foundational values and principles that integrate existing sets of values and practices throughout the organization and align them to the core purpose of the organization. MDC seeks to optimize the

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balance of safety, efficiency, and effectiveness to best deliver service to the customer. It places priority on maximizing successful mission accomplishment over rote process.

Bureaucracies tend to rely on systems and processes to make decisions. MDC relies on individuals to use their judgment, guided by values and principles versus policies and rules. In standard circumstances, the best course will normally be to use the applicable standard operating procedure (SOP). Standard situations are where the inputs are well understood and the outputs (the results) are highly predictable. In abnormal circumstances, the SOP is inadequate to solve the problem and achieve success.

A Mission Driven Culture (MDC) has six core values:

- Service for the Common Good
- High Trust State
- Pursuit of Truth
- Form & Function Defined by the End State
- Individual Initiative
- Continuous Improvement

MDC uses a system of mission command - decentralized decision-making, guided by a framework of leader's intent combined with the authority and expectation to act. Senior leaders communicate the task, purpose and end state of an assignment and provide the needed resources. The *how* of getting it done – the planning and the execution - is delegated to sub leaders.

In the absence of guidance, operators are expected to act within the intent of the organization's mission. Operators should constantly strive to influence their environment to accomplish the mission. They act as leaders regardless of rank. The BC at the casino was an operator. By his telling, his decisions and actions were a product of a mission-driven culture.

Mission command is extraordinarily disciplined. Each operator is highly accountable for their actions and the flow of information. Senior leaders still communicate constraints – things that must be done or things that cannot be done – but MDC focuses on training people how to use their judgment, rather than rely solely on rules and policy.

Agencies are experiencing an explosion of complexity, and with that, increased expectations and accountability. Federal assistance is shrinking or at best, flat lined. These trends drive the need for greater adaptability, and increasing the speed of the decision cycle. The model of hierarchal, centralized command and control reflects an obsolete leadership paradigm that believes people are cogs and controllable by systems. This model fails in large, dynamic events. Information cannot flow 'up', be decided upon, and flow 'down' fast enough before the decision is rendered irrelevant by changing circumstance.

Paradoxically, centralization seems part of our nature. For the most part, emergency responders work in government agencies that tend to be bureaucracies. Bureaucracies seek equilibrium and self-preservation. The goal is expressed as control and is most frequently achieved by attempting to eliminate uncertainty and surprises. The absence of bad things becomes valued more than the presence of good things. The well-worn path to avoid bad things is to make lots of rules and centralize authority.

Inevitably layers on layers of policies and rules impact operational culture. They create a culture of permission asking followers. Originally intended to eliminate negative outcomes, myriad rules end up stifling initiative,

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discretion and judgment. While waiting for permission, critical windows of opportunity are missed, and, as we read earlier, a man drowns to death.

This is the *Myth of Control*. The more one tries to reach down and grab control in chaos, the less control one actually has. That cultural model creates micromanagers and followers rather than leaders and operators.

The culture of permission asking also creates risk aversion. Followers are more afraid of breaking rules and making mistakes than of missing an opportunity to make a difference. Team failure is acceptable because of the cultural norm that individual failure, and not team failure, is what gets punished. Thus, the focus is not on success, but rather on avoiding failure.

Nearly 200 years ago, Carl von Clausewitz first used the term *Fog* in describing the effects of chaos on the battlefield. The phrase, *Fog of War* quickly became part of military science. He noted that the combination of friction, danger and uncertainty would stymie the efforts of a force to project its will on the operational environment. These elements are inherent in the DNA of chaos. An increase in one – uncertainty, for example – tends to start a snowball effect with the other two elements and quite often magnifies their cumulative effects unexpectedly.

We're at a point in society where the fire or the flood is no longer the primary issue. Second and third order effects that cascade into the strategic, human driven dimensions of incident management create new levels of complexity: Political, Security, Economic, Social, Infrastructure, Information. These dimensions greatly magnify expectations and demands for results. They add to the confusion and challenge inherent in the *fog*. Operators do not implement strategy, but in this environment one operator, at the right time and place – or the wrong time and place – can have strategic impact. Just contrast the two stories at the beginning for examples of both.

The *fog* guarantees that, by the time a request has reached higher authority, the situation has completely changed. The window of opportunity has closed. Mission Command doctrine urges "...the use of commander's intent and exercising disciplined initiative to seize, exploit and retain the initiative."

MDC and its intent based planning system is based on 3 foundational assumptions about an operating environment where the *fog of war* is common:

- Uncertainty - *Every decision made in real time is imperfect.*
- Friction - *Generally, the best decisions will be made by those closest to the event.*
- Danger - *A well trained operator, taking reasonable precautions, can still be injured or killed.*

Rules and standard operating procedures that work well in routine emergencies begin to break down quickly as the *fog* increases.

In MDC, many policies and rules are considered authoritative but flexible. Operators are expected to use disciplined initiative to adapt the rule to the situation. Operators are even expected to disobey literal orders when they understand the situation has changed where following those orders would prevent accomplishing mission intent.

MDC relies on professional judgment to reach the appropriate decision in chaotic circumstances. Decisions that result in bad outcomes, if made in good faith trying to meet the intent, are underwritten as acceptable losses and learning opportunities for the organization.

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The *Myth of Control* leads to another logic flaw within operational culture – that systems govern people instead of the other way around. This leads to a compliance mindset. Compliance is necessary and effective in managing machines, material and money. It is counter-productive in managing human behavior. Bureaucracies tend to forget that bringing order to chaos is a creative and interactive social process between humans. This type of collaboration is not managed well by policies.

In a rules-based system, any failure results in one of two possible conclusions:

1. There was no rule, so now, we just need to make a new rule.
2. The existing rule did not work. We need a better rule. A stronger rule!

Over time, the density of policy documents results in many rules that contradict others. This guarantees an environment where people cannot do their jobs and comply with all the rules on the best day. Thus, on the worst day, as chaos and the *fog of war* increase, mission success is even more unachievable. When such failure is investigated and judged in hindsight against the agency's own rules, leaders often have no viable defense.

In contrast to a centralized, rules based leadership system, Mission-Driven Culture (MDC) relies on disciplined individual initiative and professional judgment in interpreting a set (or sets) of principles, and one of MDC's most powerful organizational effects is that while accountability goes up, liability goes down. Thus, external evaluation is left to determine whether the operator's judgment was within acceptable or reasonable limits by people with roughly the same level of training, qualifications and experience as the decision maker in question. Moreover, because fear of liability is reduced, leaders can use more peer reviews or Facilitated Learning Analysis Teams for minor failures and near misses, and real discipline is reserved for willfully violating policy or for gross negligence. All other issues can be dealt with through mentoring and training.

To be sure, operator accountability is paramount. They must trust their leadership and be trusted by leadership. Operators must be trained and extremely proficient in principles based critical thinking. Consider for a moment our story of the Fire Div Chief unwilling to save a drowning child if doing so meant violating department policies and procedures. It is doubtful that those rules were enacted specifically to hamper life-saving actions, but rather to limit some other action or behavior that produced an undesirable outcome. Thus, the intent behind the policy is lost and blind adherence to them results not only in individual failure, but ultimately organizational failure as well.

Organizational leaders who have adopted intent based planning approaches to address this gap in mission achievement, describe the following indicators of success:

1. Leaders at all levels are feeling like the quality of risk decisions and discussions has improved.
2. Leaders feel like the trust state has increased up and down the chain as well as with executive staff above the agency or incident management team.
3. Leaders feel like they are getting fewer "surprises" as managers.
4. Leaders feel like they are getting better "buy in" from cooperators and stakeholders.
5. Leaders feel like they are getting higher levels of support internally and externally.

Other critical organizational metrics manifest over time: a decrease in grievances, an increase in retention, and fewer lost days. In totality, the six mission driven culture values, which provide for initiative, trust, truth and improvement, provide for greater individual judgment and accountability. Operators are specifically delegated the opportunity to succeed and, in doing so, the organization is aligned for success as well.

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What's surprising about the \$11B (USD) of federal funding provided post-9/11 to state and local response organizations for equipment and technical training is the fact that only .0058% of it has been spent on command or leader development. Another way to view this is we've likely spent more money for the helmet and gear that go on a responder's head, than what goes in it. Priorities have focused on acquiring "things" as opposed to developing skills such as decision-making, critical thinking and judgment during chaotic, complex events. The investment and commitment to the developing right culture is the necessary next step in the evolution of emergency services.

There is no denying the increased challenges responders face. Expectations are expanding; risk is escalating; societal networks are growing more complex and, consequently, more vulnerable. In this world, the centralized decision-making model is increasingly a recipe for failure.

MDC and its intent based principles and tools encourage and enable critical thinking, a common operating picture, concentric decision-making, and risk management at the operator level. MDC minimizes the friction, uncertainty and risk inherent in the *Fog of War* by increasing flexibility and adaptability. Using the context of leader's intent, operational decisions are accelerated to take advantage of opportunities for success in the field.

MDC is not like a fire extinguisher – *in case of emergency break glass* – that you can pull out and use only when a crisis hits. To be there when "it" hits the fan, it must be part of how business is done every day. In other words, *train as you fight*.

In the military, a *force multiplier* is a... "capability that, when added to and employed by a combat force, significantly increases the combat potential of that force and thus enhances the probability of successful mission accomplishment." Mission-Driven Culture is a force multiplier.

The call to action is for senior leaders of today's emergency response agencies to make the investment of time, energy and resources to build the culture that is adaptive and resilient to the ever-growing list of challenges. The outcome will be a higher level of customer service and mission accomplishment; increased trust within the community; and, leaders better prepared for future positions of increased responsibility as well as the large complex events they will undoubtedly encounter.