

## >> Commander's Intent

Strategic thinking has its roots in armed conflict, and a great deal of the strategic thought tools continue to be developed in the military context. One of the more recent developments in strategic thinking is the concept of *Commander's Intent* – a concise expression of the purpose of the operation and the desired end state that serves as the initial impetus for the planning process. It may include the commander's assessment of the adversary commander's intent and an assessment of where and how much risk is acceptable during the operation, but it leaves the implementation of that assessment up to commanders on the ground.

The concept is historically linked to the *Aftragstaktik* – best translated as mission-oriented command – developed by the German Army in desperate response to Napoleon's war methods. *Aftragstaktik* did away with the traditional linear tactics, iron discipline, blind obedience and intolerance of independent action. *Aftragstaktik* was not a set of procedures, but a philosophy – a social norm within the German army. At its foundation was the realization that battle is marked by confusion and ambiguity.

The leaders of the German army consciously traded assurance of control for assurance of self-induced action. These leaders developed a cultural norm that supported and expected decisive action by subordinates in the face of uncertainty or ambiguity.

Fundamental to the success of *Aftragstaktik* was trust. Silva writes: "Trust between superior and subordinate is the cornerstone of mission-oriented command. The superior trusts his subordinate to exercise his judgment and creativity, to act as the situation dictates to reach the maximum goal articulated in his mission; the subordinate trusts that whatever action he takes in good faith to contribute to the good of the whole will be supported by his superior."

*Commander's Intent* is the commander's stated vision which defines the purpose of an operation, the end state with respect to the relationship among the force, the enemy and the terrain. It was designed to enable subordinates to quickly grasp the successful end state and their part in achieving it.

*The commander's intent describes the desired end state. It is a concise expression of the purpose of the operation and must be understood two echelons below the issuing commander. It is the single unifying focus for all subordinate elements. Its utility is to focus subordinates on what has to be accomplished in order to achieve success, even when the plan and concept of operations no longer apply, and to discipline their efforts toward that end" (US Army Field Manual).*

Makes sense, doesn't it? Keep directives short, to the point, yet with enough information that subordinates can take it and run when things get confused. *Commander's Intent* would be a great concept to incorporate into the management culture of your company, empowering managers (and ultimately each employee) to make decisions in the midst of an ever-changing business/project dynamic that contribute to the project's and the company's ultimate success. SDB