# Organizational Leadership at the Battalion Level

*By Lieutenant Colonel Laurence M. Farrell*

*"Get your communications up or you're fired," said the brigade commander. The words stung. As the battalion commander stood in front of the brigade commander, he was deeply disillusioned. The brigade's communications structure had failed during the exercise, and the brigade commander wanted to know why. The battalion commander could not provide an answer. Even worse, he had no suggestions on how to improve the communications structure. He wondered how this had happened. Ninety days ago, he was an engineer battalion commander with technical knowledge in bridging, construction, and demolitions. Since that time, his battalion had converted to a brigade special troops battalion (BSTB) structure, and his technical knowledge of his subordinate commands was nonexistent. As the higher command headquarters of the brigade's signal company, he was responsible for the communications posture of the brigade. He felt mixed emotions. He regretted that he had not created a formal plan to learn more about the communications structures and the capabilities of the signal company. And he was angry that he was being chastised for the exacting details of signal requirements when, as an engineer officer, his knowledge of this area was minimal. Finally, he resolved to fix the structural issues in his battalion that had allowed the situation to happen.*

This scenario actually occurred to a commander of a BSTB immediately after it converted from an engineer battalion. As part of the modular force structure, the Army has created the BSTB and the divisional special troops battalion (STB). The BSTBs and STBs usually contain, at a minimum, four disparate units at the company and platoon levels. The following are examples of how they may be configured in the current force structure at the divisional level and below.

- BSTB (military intelligence, signal, chemical, military police)
- STB (signal, security, adjutant general replacement, tactical command post/tactical operations center [TAC/TOC] support, and the band)

These units require a different leadership style than a combined arms battalion that contains combined arms companies and a similar combat engineer company. For leaders to be more successful at commanding a BSTB or an STB, current leadership doctrine should be fully understood and specific procedures should be followed.

According to Field Manual 6-22, "Leadership is the process of influencing people by providing purpose, direction, and motivation, while operating to accomplish the mission and improving the organization."[1] The Army officially classifies leadership into three levels: strategic, organizational, and direct (see figure, page 45).[2] Each leadership level requires a different leadership focus while upholding the Army's eight core leader competencies and supporting behaviors described in FM 22-6.[3] At the battalion level, in most cases, direct-level leadership is still the preferred method. Most field grade leaders at the battalion level (commander, command sergeant major, executive officer, and S3) have always led at the direct level (platoon and company). That direct-level leadership lends itself to "like" units, and a battalion—even in today's modular environment—still has a moderate footprint. It is when the battalion command team leads a unit at the direct level that should be led at the organizational level that structural deficiencies become possible.

Leading at the organization level is a new and challenging experience for most field grade officers and noncommissioned officers. The Army's leadership manual reflects this challenge by stating that "organizational leaders generally include military leaders at the **brigade through corps levels"** [emphasis added].[4] The manual also states that "organizational leaders usually deal with more complexity, more people, greater uncertainty, and a greater number of unintended consequences."[5] This article provides a short, comprehensive

list of techniques and focus areas that are effective at the organizational level of leadership and are directly applicable to divisional BSTB and STB commanders, command sergeants major, executive officers, and S3s. This article also recommends potential solutions the Army can implement on a long-term basis to improve the performance of the BSTBs and STBs.

## Organizational Level Techniques

The following techniques are effective at the organizational level of leadership:

- Understand the technical requirements
- Know the core competences
- Conduct routine counseling
- Provide a vision

### Understand the Technical Requirements

Leaders at all levels must have a basic understanding of the technical requirements of their subordinate units. This is one of the greatest challenges of BSTB and STB field grade leaders, and they often neglect or minimize it for multiple reasons, to include:

- They may discount their role as technical advisors of a battalion-sized element.
- They may think that they do not have time to learn new technical skills.
- They may decide that fully delegating the technical part of their duty performance is acceptable.

These perspectives, though seemingly reasonable, are not in keeping with current Army doctrine. To put it bluntly, leadership requires a technical component. This is clearly stated in FM 6-22: "Direct, organizational, and strategic level leaders need to know what functional value the equipment has for their operations and how to employ the equipment in their units and organizations. At higher levels, the requirement for technical knowledge shifts from understanding how to operate single items of equipment to how to employ entire systems."[6]

This paradigm is also reinforced by the guidance given during a recent lieutenant colonel command board. Military Personnel (MILPER) Message 06-210 states that "officers will be slated per the Army command/key billet guidance prioritizing skills and experience… officers should consider how their skills and experiences best match those commands or key billets available and make preferences that best match their personal desires to where their skills and experiences exist. Officers should focus on specific or like-type units where they have previously served and not necessarily the location."[7]

The guidance and doctrine are clear. Leadership has a technical component, and it is relevant at the higher command levels. The challenge is to implement a program that trains field grade leaders. At the organizational level, a simple solution is a comprehensive leader development program. The value of a long-term leader development program should not be discounted. A focused program of instruction, with hands-on training with proper training aids, can result in a high degree of technical competency in a relatively short amount of time. The United States Army Engineer School uses this method to teach complex engineering subjects—such as the analytical bridge classification method in the Captains Career Course—to many officers with no engineering experience. This process can be replicated at the battalion level for a variety of topics. Finally, most divisional life cycle units experience their turnover immediately after a deployment and then are refilled and held steady for about three years. This situation further allows the "in-house" training program to be spread out over a longer time period.

### Know the Core Competences

Leaders at the organizational level must focus on the unit's core competencies to have the greatest effect. This dictum has even more relevance if the unit is composed of disparate subunits such as in the BSTB and STB. In a maneuver battalion, with four like subunits, the battalion leadership can choose a variety of military occupational specialty (MOS)-specific tasks to devote training time, energy, and resources. Here, the commitment of resources has an economy of scale and an immediate effect across the battalion. This is not the

**Army Leadership Levels (Figure 3-3 from FM 6-22)**

*"Leaders at the organizational level must craft a vision and consistently reinforce it throughout the command."*

case in a BSTB or an STB. In them, the battalion leadership usually does not have time to generate multiple distinctive training programs for each company. The essential question is, Where can the battalion leadership leverage their experience to maximize the training? Fortunately, the Army provides the answer— the 40 Warrior Tasks and 11 Battle Drills. According to the Chief of Staff of the Army, these Warrior Tasks and Battle Drills "illustrate warrior-focused training" in support of the "long war."[8]

In units such as the BSTB or STB, where there are always competing demands for specific MOS training and combat training, the battalion leadership is critical in providing a balance between these two competing demands. Finally, in focusing on the Warrior Tasks and Battle Drills the battalion leadership can conduct battalion ranges and minimize risk. The value of this effect cannot be overestimated. Many subunits in a BSTB or an STB have limited exposure to the requirements of live fire ranges and require battalion-level support to execute the range properly and safely.

**Conduct Routine Counseling**

In BSTBs and STBs, the battalion leadership must conduct written, deliberate performance counseling "routinely." This counseling requirement has added importance if the units are geographically dispersed—as most BSTBs and STBs are. Though FM 6-22[9] and DA PAM 623-3[10] clearly state the Army counseling requirements, many battalion-level leaders and above do not fulfill the requirements according to the regulation. Written counseling is often replaced with verbal counseling that is conducted *ad hoc*. Though verbal counseling can be effective, its application is usually limited to direct-level leadership of like units. For example, it is easier for a maneuver commander to give guidance to a subordinate maneuver unit that needs to improve the company's score on "Table 8 Gunnery" than it is for a BSTB commander to give guidance on a communication problem. Though this might not be "fair," it is the reality.

In units such as BSTBs and STBs, written counseling serves as the intent paragraph similar to the operations order. According to FM 6-22, counseling "communicates standards and is an opportunity for leaders to establish and clarify the expected values, attributes, and competencies."[11] Since the battalion commander and command sergeant major have limited time, exposure, and probably technical expertise, the counseling provides a "compass" for priorities for the long term. This is key for an organizational leader to be effective.

**Provide a Vision**

Leaders at the organizational level must craft a vision and consistently reinforce it throughout the command. Often a vision is the "shortest leg" and most neglected of the "command triad" (command philosophy, training guidance, and command vision). Unlike training guidance—which must be issued quarterly and validated at the quarterly training brief—there is no defined metric that measures if a unit is making progress toward the vision. Unlike a command philosophy, which tends to be more specific in nature, command vision statements tend to be "nebulous." The result is often a PowerPoint® slide put up in the battalion headquarters and then ignored. The vision, when properly utilized, provides clarity to the command's purposes. It shows junior-level leaders what the organizational long-term goals are in the unit. The vision has added importance in BSTBs and STBs. Unlike a maneuver unit, where Soldiers clearly see that they are part of a larger team working toward common goals, Soldiers in a BSTB or STB may feel that they are operating independently from the other companies in the battalion. An organizational vision serves as a unifying tool that allows Soldiers to see that they have common goals regardless of their MOS.

## Army-Level Solutions

Potential solutions at the Army level, such as the following, can improve the performance of BSTBs and STBs:

- Create a DA-certified BSTB/STB field grade leaders course
- Create a BSTB/STB identifier

**Create a DA-Certified BSTB/STB Field Grade Leaders Course**

The Army should create a field grade leaders course for both officers and field grade senior noncommissioned officers assigned to BSTBs and STBs. Although there is tremendous value in having a functional, enforced officer professional development (OPD) program at the organizational level, there are limitations to this approach. Similar to most units, personnel will have competing demands on their time, all units are susceptible to last minute requirements and, most importantly, a DA-centralized course creates a common skill set across the Army and standardizes the basic requirements of field grade leaders in BSTBs or STBs.

Prior to modularity, the divisional "slice" battalions trained and maintained their respective units and then attached these units to the maneuver commander for employment. The senior leaders of these battalions were experts in their respective fields and honed their skills to better train and mentor their subordinates. That specific function of mentoring subordinates on technical and maintenance requirements is extremely difficult without a formal training program provided by the Army. It is impossible to mentor someone on something that you are not familiar with.

The field grade leader training course would be approximately three to four weeks long with each branch or "module" having one week of dedicated training time. (The Army already embraces the concept of specific training courses for commanders and command sergeants major in courses such as the Garrison Precommand Course at Fort Belvoir, Virginia, and the Recruiting Precommand Course at Fort Jackson, South Carolina). Although three to four weeks might seem excessive, the Reserve Component Captains Career Course is seventeen days long and covers one branch with a tactical focus. The BSTB course would cover tactics as well as maintenance issues. That the Army has multiple preestablished ongoing training courses for stateside garrison commands, but not for complex units going into combat, is an "oddity" that should be corrected.

**Create a BSTB/STB Identifier**

The Army should create a BSTB/STB identifier and use the identifier in placing officers and noncommissioned officers that have been selected to command at the battalion level. According to MILPER message 06-210, the Army is placing priority on assigning officers and noncommissioned officers in units where they have previously served.[12] This criterion should formally extend to the BSTBs and STBs. Having commanders that have served previously in a BSTB or an STB, and that have completed the BSTB/STB certification course, would solve the problems described above in mentoring junior leaders concerning training and maintaining equipment. This has great value both up and down the chain of command. Not only does it bond the junior leader with the senior officer and noncommissioned officer, but it also prevents situations such as the one described in the scenario at the beginning of this article.

## Summary

Commanding a BSTB or an STB is a challenging experience. For many battalion-level leaders, it is the first time in their Army career that they are leading Soldiers with different skill sets from their own, are geographically dispersed, and belong to distinctive subunit companies. In this type of unit, the battalion leadership is leading at the organizational level. At this level of leadership, leaders must follow doctrine as the foundation for their actions. Though there are actions that the battalion leadership can implement to address the complexity of this organization, such as a focused OPD program, I believe that ultimately the Army should create a BSTB/STB certification course. This course would quickly and significantly enhance the technical and tactical knowledge of the field grade leaders in these units, enhance the mentoring process and leader development that occurs for the battalion command team and, most importantly, increase the combat capacity of these units.

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**Endnotes**

[1] FM 6-22, *Army Leadership*, 12 October 2006, p. 1-2.

[2] Ibid., pp. 3-6 and 3-7 and Figure 3-3.

[3] Ibid., p. 2-7.

[4] Ibid., paragraph 3-39, p. 3-7.

[5] Ibid., paragraph 3-40, p. 3-7.

[6] Ibid., paragraph 6-36, p. 6-7.

[7] MILPER Message 06-210, *FY08 Lieutenant Colonel Army Competitive Category Centralized Selection List*, issued 28 July 2006, page 7.

[8] Chief of Staff of the Army speech at the Association of the United States Army (AUSA) Convention, 10 October 2006.

[9] FM 6-22, Appendix B.

[10] Department of the Army Pamphlet 623-3, *Evaluation Reporting System,* 10 August 2007.

[11] FM 6-22, paragraph B-17, page B-3.

[12] MILPER Message 06-210, page 7.

Note: The opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or the positions of the United States Army Engineer School, the Maneuver Support Center, the United States Army, or the Department of Defense. The author invites your feedback concerning current BSTB and STB employment and past experiences for a follow-on article. His e-mail address is *<laurence.farrell @us.army.mil>*.