

Subject: Exercise of Command – Excess of Detail in Orders and Instructions

1. I have been concerned for many years over the increasing tendency – now grown almost to “standard practice” – of flag officers and other group commanders to issue orders and instructions in which their subordinates are told “how” as well as “what” to do to such and extent and in such detail that the “Custom of the service” has virtually become the antithesis of that essential element of command – “initiative of the subordinate.”
2. We are preparing for – and are now close to – those active operations (commonly called war) which require the exercise and utilization of the full powers and capabilities of every officer in command status. There will be neither time nor opportunity to do more than prescribe the several tasks of the several subordinates (to say “what”, perhaps “when” and “where” and usually for their intelligent cooperation, “why”); leaving to them – expecting and requiring of them – the capacity to perform the assigned tasks (to do the “how”).
3. If subordinates are deprived – as they now are – of that training and experience which will enable them to act “on their own” – if they do not know, by constant practice, how to exercise “initiative of the subordinates” – if they are reluctant (afraid) to act because they are accustomed to detailed orders and instructions – if they are not habituated to think, to judge, to decide and to act for themselves in their several echelons of command – we shall be in sorry case when the time of “active operations” arrives.
4. The reasons for the current state of affairs – how did we get this way? – are many but among them are four which need mention; first the “anxiety” of seniors that everything in their commands shall be conducted so correctly and so smoothly, that none may comment unfavorably; second, those energetic activities of staffs which lead to infringement of (not to say interference with) the function for which the lower echelons exist; third the consequent “anxiety” of subordinate least their exercise of initiative, even in their legitimate spheres, should result in their doing something which may prejudice their selection for promotion; fourth, the habit on the one hand and expectations on the other of “nursing” and “being nursed” which lead respectively to that violation of command principles known as “orders to obey orders” and that admission of incapacity or confusion evidenced by “request instructions.”
5. Let us consider certain facts; first submarines operating submerged are constantly confronted with situations requiring the correct exercise of judgment, decision and action; second, planes, whether operating singly or in company, are even more often called upon to act correctly; third, surface ships entering or leaving port, make a landfall, steaming in thick weather, etc., can and do meet such situations while “acting singly” and as well, the problems involved in maneuvering in formations and dispositions. Yet these same people – proven competent to do these things without benefit of “advice” from higher up – are, when grown in years and experience to be echelon commanders, all too often not made full use of conducting the affairs (administrative and operative) of their several echelons – echelons which exist of the purpose of facilitating command.
6. It is essential to extend the knowledge and the practice of “initiative of the subordinate” in principle and in application until they are universal in the exercise of command throughout all echelons of command. Henceforth, we must all see to it that full use is made of the echelons of command – whether administrative (type) or operative (task) – by habitually framing orders and instructions to echelon commanders so as to tell the “what to do” but not “how to do it” unless the particular circumstances so demand.
7. The corollaries of paragraphs 6 are:
 - (a) adopt the premise that the echelon commanders are competent in their several command echelons unless and until they themselves prove otherwise;
 - (b) teach them that they are not only expected to be competent for their several command echelons but that it is required of them that they be competent;
 - (c) train them – by guidance and supervision – to exercise foresight, to think, to judge, to decide and to act for themselves;
 - (d) stop “nursing” them;
 - (e) Finally, train ourselves to be satisfied with “acceptable solutions:” even though they are not “staff solutions” or other particular solutions that we ourselves prefer.

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