

The Marine Corps maneuver warfare philosophy as described in MCDP 1, *Warfighting*, requires the commander to base all his actions on his mission and to orient those actions on the enemy. The Marine Corps Planning Process supports the commander in decisionmaking, and is focused on the mission and the threat. In order to maintain this orientation, the commander must focus his planners on those issues he deems critical to meet his decision making requirements. He focuses them during mission analysis through his commander's orientation, which includes the commander's battlespace area evaluation (CBAE) along with his initial guidance. Essentially, this commander's orientation is employed to focus the planners on determining what needs to be done in order to satisfy the purpose of the operation. Once that has been accomplished and the mission statement has been produced, the commander will further focus his staff for course of action (COA) development by providing his "Commander's Planning Guidance." This commander's planning guidance will assist in developing the "how" of mission accomplishment. Some commanders however, do not realize all the potential benefits of their planning guidance. This article will attempt to identify and propose solutions for common problems in preparing and communicating commander's planning guidance.

MCWP 5-1, Marine Corps Planning Process, states that:

The commander's planning guidance focuses the staff during COA development. It should be specific enough to assist the planning effort, but not so specific as to inhibit COA development. This guidance may be expressed in terms of warfighting functions, types of operations, forms of maneuver, etc. It should include the commander's vision of *decisive and shaping actions...*(Authors' italics.)

Planning guidance builds upon the commander's intent presented during the CBAE by providing preliminary decisions required to focus the planners on the commander's conceptual vision of the operation. It also describes the linkage between friendly and enemy centers of gravity and critical vulnerabilities, with decisive and shaping actions. Frequently, however, commanders omit this linkage. This may result in subordinates losing their focus on the mission and the enemy. (See Figure 1.)

- Threat vulnerabilities.
- Risk.
- Any further constraints and/or restraints.
- Decisive and shaping actions.
- Selection and employment of the main effort.
- Types of operations.
- Forms of maneuver.
- Command relationships.
- Task organization.
- Arrangement of the operation—phasing.
- Timing of operations.
- Establishment and use of a reserve.
- Evaluation of the battlespace.
- Mobility and countermobility.
- Targeting priorities.
- Intelligence collection priorities.

**Figure 1. Possible elements of commander's planning guidance.**

An additional friction point that occasionally arises is the confusion of planning guidance with commander's intent. The commander's intent is presented early in planning as part of his CBAE and may be refined throughout the planning process. It constitutes his personal expression of the purpose, or

“why,” of the operation. It may also include how the commander envisions achieving a decision as well as the end state or conditions that, when satisfied, accomplish the purpose. As mentioned above, planning guidance provides preliminary decisions required to focus the planners on the commander’s conceptual vision of the operation. Mixing the two may generate confusion over priorities and dissipate focus.

Another key consideration with respect to planning guidance is time. Time is often the scarcest resource in planning. Commander’s planning guidance becomes a pivotal tool in generating tempo. The level of detail provided in planning guidance should be inversely proportional to the amount of time available. For example, if the situation is time-constrained, the commander may give very detailed guidance. Such planning guidance reflects the commander’s time constraints on his staff, forcing them to focus on pertinent requirements and make better use of their limited time. On the other hand, if there is more time for planning the commander may choose to give broader guidance in order to allow the staff to generate more creative options for his consideration.

Figure 2 shows an example of a commander’s intent, mission statement, and planning guidance, drawn from an actual exercise conducted by the operating forces. In this case, the commander has clearly and succinctly articulated the overall purpose of his command’s mission. He has also given very directive planning guidance based on the mission to his staff. He has focused them on exploiting enemy critical vulnerabilities and has directed them to ensure that the main effort is strong enough to achieve a decision in the manner he envisions. He has also identified some of the requisite shaping actions to facilitate the decisive action and given them guidance on developing additional supporting details. He has conceptually organized operations into phases in order to prioritize tasks. Given this firm guidance from the commander, the staff was very quickly able to produce COAs that satisfied the commander’s decisionmaking requirements.

**Intent:** The purpose of our operation is to facilitate the introduction of follow-on forces. We will conduct an amphibious operation to establish a lodgment to receive the follow-on forces.

**Mission:** Conduct an amphibious operation and defeat the enemy in zone in order to facilitate the introduction of follow-on forces.

**Planning Guidance:** The enemy’s COG is the Tenth Independent Brigade; during mission analysis we determined, however, that while that unit is lethal it is also vulnerable in that it is tied to fixed defenses without much mobility. I therefore want to land behind his fixed defenses and attack from an unexpected direction—that is our decisive action. Look at how we are going to get the force ashore and in a position to do that, with the requisite combat power to defeat the enemy quickly. I suspect that only his artillery will be capable of impacting our initial landing, so study what we’ll have to do to eliminate that capability prior to landing. It looks like the enemy dispositions and terrain will support either an envelopment or a turning movement—give me a COA for each. I want maximum combat power ashore early and to make that happen I’m willing to accept the trade-off, and inherent risk, of less sustainment in the initial days of the operation. We also need to shape the enemy for that decisive action by making him think we will conform to his expectations—in other words, deceive him into thinking we will attack into his strength—so look at ways of pulling that off. Once the Tenth Independent Brigade is defeated our lodgment ashore can be built up and we can defeat the remaining enemy in detail. I see this as a multiphase operation—Phase I is shaping by attacking his artillery and conducting deception operations; Phase II is decisive action with an amphibious assault to envelop or turn the Tenth Independent Brigade; Phase III is consolidation to establish and secure the lodgment; and then Phase IV is the facilitation of follow-on forces. The last two may be concurrent—give me your opinion on that. I envision the ACE as the main effort in Phase I, the GCE as the main effort in Phase II and III, and the CSSE in Phase IV.

**Figure 2. Example of commander’s intent and planning guidance.**

*MARINE CORPS GAZETTE ARTICLE # 5, PLANNING GUIDANCE*

This example illustrates how the commander brings discipline to the planning process so that the staff focuses on the mission and the enemy while remaining sensitive to time, friendly capabilities, and information he needs to make a decision. Without this guidance from the commander to focus his subordinates, the staff is left to a “best guess” methodology and results may be “hit or miss.” In summary, well thought out and articulated planning guidance, issued prior to COA development, is one of the best ways the commander can focus his subordinates on producing viable options for him to accomplish his mission.