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# MISSION COMMAND

In the military, internal communications defines leadership, often in critical situations, says **Colonel Thomas A. Kolditz**

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In the brutal heat of the Iraqi afternoon, the soldier struggled with a pry bar that would help break free the track of the M1A1 main battle tank. Smoke drifted under the tank fender. Part of the track had separated on the detonation of an improvised explosive device. Though the tank had already been pulled from the initial site of the blast by an 80-ton recovery vehicle, the threat of snipers brought an intensity to his efforts. Once he and his team dropped the track from the tank, they would need to replace two 60-pound links of the 4,850-pound stretch of steel and rubber, and then reassemble the track under tension. This kind of work is the unsung part of combat. It is part of the battle, its own kind of fight. As the mechanic's forearm sweated and flexed, a strategic organizational message was visible, etched into his skin in coal black tattoo ink:

**"I will always place the mission first  
I will never accept defeat  
I will never quit  
I will never leave a fallen comrade" ↗**

That is internal communication in extremis. The warrior ethos tattooed on the arm of this enthusiastic soldier is part of the Army's internal communication strategy; it tells soldiers what is most important in the absence of more specific guidance.

I've spent the past 10 years or so studying leadership and organizational behavior in dangerous contexts – from combat zones to commercial parachute centers – where decisions are made under extreme duress. One might suppose that case studies and principles gleaned from such experiences are hyper-specialized and difficult to apply to typical business circumstances. The opposite is true. There is a primal honesty about interpersonal exchanges when lives are on the line.

### CONSISTENT CORE MESSAGES

Talk of internal communication often focuses on the modes of delivery: electronic mail, memoranda, formal communications, meetings, water cooler gossip. But organizational leadership can control only some of these.

In an ideal situation, internal communication carries predictable and valuable content, is in a clear format, adds clarity, and reduces complexity. But ideal cases are rare. An organization can quickly find itself hamstrung by information that is passed on late, or full of inaccuracies, or by information overload. It can foster a feeling that the organization is fragmented and chaotic.

People who live and work in dangerous contexts communicate in space that is inherently volatile, complex, and ambiguous. So, lessons from these experiences can have value when ambiguity, risk, and uncertainty arise in non-combat situations. Three overarching characteristics of internal communication in dangerous contexts hold true for all organizations: consistent core messages, individualized concern, and the primacy of honesty and integrity.

Typically, organizations use internal communication to tell people what to do and how to do it. However, the best organizations use consistent core messages to empower people to do the right things in the right way, whatever the

circumstances. In dangerous contexts, it is usually impossible to communicate moment to moment or to have perfect situational awareness. This makes it necessary for leaders to empower others through consistent internal core messaging.

An exemplar of this principle was seen in the case of Tulane Hospital, part of Hospital Corporation of America (HCA) located in the center of New Orleans, which had to be evacuated during Hurricane Katrina. CEO Jack Bovender could communicate only intermittently through occasional e-mail. But he had established a four-part core message: commitment to patients, empowerment of staff, individual responsibility and communication when possible. The staff mounted an impressive and successful evacuation, even with sketchy communication and little situational awareness.

Bovender would later explain that the core message was built into the organization day in, day out: "You can't change yourself into something in 30 minutes that you haven't been in 30 years." The internal communication that led to success in the swirling disaster that was Katrina was also the internal communication that guided HCA toward excellence every day. The point is that when you are "on core message" internally, the level of specificity and timeliness in other forms of communication become less critical.

### INDIVIDUALIZED CONCERN

One of the most important outcomes of internal communication is the reinforcement of a sense of organizational loyalty and commitment. In a landmark study on trust in combat, Colonel Pat Sweeney, a West Point professor, gathered data on the famous 101st Airborne Division during the attack on Baghdad in 2003. His work revealed that there were two fundamental components to trust among leaders and soldiers in the division.

The first of these, not surprisingly, was competence at doing the deadly business of the organization. The second, however, was loyalty in the organization from the top down, and particularly when that loyalty was expressed in individualized concern for people. Organizational leadership had to make clear, in both words and action, that while the

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of Missouri, a Master of Military Arts and Science from the School of Advanced Military Studies, and a Masters in Strategic Studies from the US Army War College. His 32-year career has included commands on three continents, as well as leadership development positions in the Pentagon, the Center of Army Leadership, and West Point.

Kolditz has published widely. His most recent book, *In Extremis Leadership: Leading As If Your Life Depended On It*, was based on more than 100 interviews on the ground in Iraq during combat operations.

Since 2001, Kolditz has served as coach to the US Military Academy Sport Parachute Team. He weaves his personal experiences and abilities as a soldier, skydiver, and scholar into the study, analysis, and practice of leadership in dangerous circumstances.

In 2007 he was appointed a Visiting Professor at the Yale School of Management and teaches a crisis leadership course in the MBA curriculum. He is a Fellow in the American Psychological Association, a member of the Academy of Management and of the Society of Psychologists in Management.



fighting might be intense and not all would make it, every decision on the battlefield would take into account the wellbeing of soldiers. The soldiers respected both the concern and the honesty in the message, which fostered intense trust. Mention of specific individuals and their recent accomplishments were especially powerful in communicating internally that the organization was tightly bound, mutually supportive, self aware, and protective.

We see this same technique at a national level during the State of the Union address by the President, where ordinary Americans are singled out in extraordinary fashion. Too often, internal communications are structured so as to deliver messages to the entire organization at once, an inherently impersonal, sterile act. Storytelling, on the other hand, can highlight individual actions in ways that not only carry a message but also show an organization's concern for its members. A great general once said that the best leaders look at their formations and see not a platoon of soldiers, but 40 individuals in uniform. It's how all good organizations see themselves – particularly organizations that carry a high degree of risk because of the premium placed on trust.

#### HONESTY AND INTEGRITY

In combat research, honesty and integrity are among the most valued attributes in soldiers. That is because in the confusion and ambiguity of dangerous contexts, absolute truthfulness, devoid of embellishment or exaggeration, can make the difference between a good decision or a tragic miscalculation.

Yet, many organizations fail on this basic point by trying to spin their own members. A disastrous example: on September 14 2010, the Egyptian government newspaper *Al-Ahram* published a doctored photo in which President Hosni Mubarak was portrayed leading the delegation of heads of government at White House peace talks between Israelis and Palestinians. The inevitable result was a blizzard of absurd internet images that put the embarrassed leader's image in lunar landings, running with the bulls in Pamplona, and other improbable situations. This was Mubarak's point of no return – leaders cannot recover from lies that make them the object of ridicule to their people and the outside world.

In dangerous contexts, the urgency of the situation strips away administrative distractions and reveals the core essentials of organizational communication. Whether in crisis or not, internal communication means more to our organizations than the mere passing of information. In the strategic sense, it sets the stage for empowerment, trust, loyalty, and confidence – and the success and joy felt in organizations that achieve those aims. ☺

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The views expressed herein are those of the author and do not reflect the position of the United States Military Academy, the Department of the Army, or the Department of Defense.



Warrior ethos:  
The US Soldier's Creed