

## Commander's Intent

**Lesson Objective:** Describe the essential elements that make up a Commander's Intent.

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.

### Desired Learning Outcomes (DLO):

1. Describe what is included in a Commander's Intent.
2. Describe the meaning of desired end state.
3. Summarize who needs the Commander's Intent.
4. Describe the documents provide intent and vision.

**Scheduled Lesson Time:** 45 minutes

### Introduction

How does your team respond when a plan changes? Does everyone seem to know what to do or is there confusion, a lack of meaningful activity, or people standing around waiting to be told what to do next? Planning is difficult whether in business or the military. Military planners use Commander's Intent to ensure a plan maintains relevancy and applicability in a chaotic, dynamic, and resource-constrained environment.

### 1. Commander's Intent Described

Commander's Intent is the description and definition of what a successful mission will look like. Military planning begins with the Mission Statement that describes the: who, what, when, where, and why (the 5 W's) of how a mission will be executed. Commander's Intent describes how the Commander envisions the result at the conclusion of the mission. It shows what success looks like. Commander's Intent fully recognizes the chaos, lack of a complete information picture, changes in situation, and other relevant factors that may make a plan either completely or partially obsolete when it is executed. The role of Commander's Intent is to empower subordinates and guide their initiative and improvisation as they adapt the plan to the changing environment. Commander's Intent empowers initiative, improvisation, and adaptation by providing guidance of what a successful conclusion looks like. Commander's Intent is vital in chaotic, demanding, and dynamic environments.

Commander's intent is simply vital to your unit's success. When you develop and effectively express commander's intent, subordinates:

- should know their mission
- should know your vision of how the mission is to be executed
- should know how much risk is tolerable
- should know the degree of latitude they are to have in carrying out the mission

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In return, you can expect that:

- they should better know their jobs
- they should do better at their jobs
- they should work with each other better
- they should get the mission accomplished

Commander's intent expresses purpose and end-state. It answers the questions, "What does 'right' look like?" "Why are we here?" and "How will we know when we have it right?" Its use is not limited to unit command. It can be used for any project, incident, activity, course, etc.

## **2. The meaning of "desired end state"**

End state. The set of required conditions that defines achievement of the commander's objectives. (JP 1-02. SOURCE: JP 3-0) In short, what "right" looks like.

The conditions that represent the end state of a mission are broad in nature and represent the conditions that must be set in terms of personnel, resources and other civil and military forces in relationship to your squadron. Again, all of these conditions must be set by any course of action that is developed for consideration.

Here is an example of the Virginia Adjutant General's End State for his units.

*"The premier ready, relevant, rapid response force, manned, equipped, and trained to respond to federal and state requirements. Prepared to deploy/employ as directed by the Governor or President to assist local, state, and/or federal authorities to protect life and property; to preserve peace, order, and public safety, as well as relieve suffering. Our partners, agencies, and citizens have unwavering trust and confidence in us. DMA is a place where all (our team) want to serve and support and a source of pride. Leaders accept uncompromising responsibility for the safety and wellness of our force and are committed to excellence."*

## **3. Who needs the Commander's Intent**

Your staff. The key to successful Commander's Intent is a trained, confident, and engaged staff and squadron. All members must understand the plan and when they have to deviate to ensure the Commander's Intent is accomplished. Personnel have to employ a "Spectrum of Improvisation" when they execute Commander's Intent. As they adapt the plan to meet Commander's Intent, they do not want to change proven processes and other common work techniques that are part of the plan and strengthen operational outcomes. Many times the plan is a source of strength; leaders need to adapt only the portions of a plan that require adjustment. The Spectrum of Improvisation is to retain processes and systems that support mission excellence and adapt only necessary elements.

Steps to grow initiative and improvisation are essential to have a staff base that can execute Commander's Intent. The following are training ideas and concepts to grow an employee capability for Commander's Intent:

1. **Simulation Training and After-Action Reviews.** Organizations need to find a way to allow staff to simulate missions, unit recalls, or planning sessions. These simulations can incorporate dynamic changes that will force staff to adapt themselves and their teams to new changes to meet the existing mission objectives.
2. **Small Projects.** Empowering a subordinate or a team to attempt a new project has little risk to the squadron function and is an excellent testing ground to build confidence, improvisation, and a larger staff base with nominal risk.
3. **Past History and Current Events.** A strong understanding of past missions provides context, ideas, and a perspective on the value of improvisation in previous operations and missions that are a part of future planning.

Commander's Intent is the definition and description of what a successful operation will yield. Good Commander's Intent allows staff and teams to adapt the plan using improvisation, initiative, and adaptation to reach the original plan objectives.

#### **4. Documents that provide your Commander's Intent**

When establishing commander's intent you have a couple of choices. The first choice (See Figure 1) is to write a single document that covers your intent as a new commander. The second choice is to write a commander's philosophy (see Figure 2) that covers your vision as well as your expectations and provide commander's intent for specific missions. So how do we do it?

##### ***Forming Commander's Intent***

Forming commander's intent is an exercise in self-reflection as much as it is an examination of the mission at hand. You can't develop a clear message to your members if you aren't clear about what you want to do and more importantly, why you want to do it.

It's a good idea to start with the big ideas and the big "whys" and work down rather than starting with a key detail and working up. Remember that as a commander it's not your job to tell someone how to do something, you tell them why something has to be done and what the end state should look like and their place in getting it done.

There might be different versions depending on the level of detail necessary for the audience, and a commander may do many during his/her tenure as intent can extend to individual activities and projects.

The concept of commander's intent can cover a lot of different issues and types of activities. It obviously covers the mission: of CAP, of the wing, etc. It can also cover a project within the wing, such as an FTX or an encampment. It can cover administrative activities, such as how staff and subordinate commanders approach you directly.

##### ***What a Commander's Intent Statement Can Look Like***

Consider the example of a member assuming command of his/her squadron. Most commanders have developed at least a draft or notional commander's intent before they assume command.

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At least they have an idea of what they want to accomplish, how they wish to accomplish it, and how they want their staff and subordinate commanders to support it. It's important that this

**RESOURCES:**

Carucci, R., Nawaz, S., Kehoe, M., & Thomas, M. (2018, July 25). 3 Ways Senior Leaders Create a Toxic Culture. Retrieved August 02, 2020, from <https://hbr.org/2018/05/3-ways-senior-leaders-create-a-toxic-culture>

Carucci, R. (2019, March 26). Are Your High Expectations Hurting Your Team? Retrieved August 02, 2020, from <https://hbr.org/2019/01/are-your-high-expectations-hurting-your-team>

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vision be clearly communicated to all members. Writing is the most efficient method. Below is an example of what this might look like:

|   |  |  |
|---|--|--|
| (CAP LETTERHEAD)  |  | (DATE)   |
| MEMORANDUM FOR ALL SQUADRON MEMBERS   |  |  |
| SUBJECT: COMMANDER'S INTENT   |  |  |
| FROM: LIEUTENANT COLONEL JANE DOE, XYZ CADET SQUADRON COMMANDER   |  |  |
| <ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. I am humbled to be selected by Colonel Stow as the XYZ Cadet Squadron commander. Many of us were here when the squadron was launched, and we've worked and grown together.</li><li>2. I want to take just a moment to outline for you my commander's intent as we move forward together:<br/><br/>MISSION: Our mission is simple, to grow the best cadets in the XYZ Wing. To do this, we will use all the tools at our disposal: leadership education (for cadets and for senior members), character development, aerospace education and emergency services training. We will help our cadets learn about and internalize CAP's Core Values by modeling them at every meeting, at every opportunity. We will work as one team with one goal: making our cadets the best they can be.<br/><br/>END STATE: We will have a squadron even more successful and vibrant than before. Our squadron will be a respected organization in the wing and in the community; more important, our cadets will be leaders. Their parents will be glad they "lent" them to us. And the cadets themselves will grow into outstanding young men and women who will in turn lead us.</li><li>3. You are the best members in XYZ Wing and we can, and will, succeed together.</li></ol> |  |  |
| CC: All members   |  | JANE DOE, Lieutenant Colonel, CAP<br>Commander, XYZ Cadet Squadron |

Fig 1

Let's break this down. In this case, the commander is outlining her intent for command of the squadron. As a new commander, she wants to ensure that all members understand the squadron's mission and what her vision of success looks like. She knows that with 35 members in the squadron there is potential for the message to get scrambled. Thus, she writes a formal memo to all squadron members.

First, she is very clear about stating that this is in fact, commander's intent. It's not a wish, it is a path.

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She defines the mission clearly and concisely, "to grow the best cadets in XYZ Wing." It is a call to action that all the unit's members can wrap their minds (and hopefully hearts) around. Only

then does she briefly describe how this will take place. She does so using positive and inclusive language, demonstrating that this is a team effort.

Then, the commander describes what her vision of the end state looks like. This is how success is measured.

In reality, the statement of mission and end-state could have been the beginning and end of the memo. The commander, though, took it a step further. While she didn't have to do so, she also wants to recognize that this is a shared journey and showed how much she valued her fellow members as peers. She recognized in writing the transition of her role because she was their peer until she was selected as commander.

Also note what the commander doesn't do in the memo: she doesn't tell them how to do their jobs or try to do their jobs for them. She simply illustrates the goal and frames her expectations.

From the members' perspective, this memo answers the questions about why they exist and what "right" is going to look like. It's the foundation upon which they build their plans, schedule their activities, execute their operations, and simply make the squadron function. Now that they know the task, the goal and the reason, they can be unleashed to achieve it.

### ***Command Philosophy***

Another option available to the commander is to write a command philosophy. A command philosophy goes further in-depth that allows you, as the commander, to provide greater detail than the commander's intent by adding vision, values and expectations. It allows you to provide detailed insight to what you see as the essential areas that will make your squadron stronger and more efficient. Examples are; how do we train our personnel, are we taking care of our members professional growth, your plan for leader development in the unit and how we communicate. As noted earlier, putting your commander's intent and/or command philosophy in writing allows everyone to see the same information the exact same way, vice the possible interpretations from an original briefing or second hand information.

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(CAP LETTERHEAD)

(DATE)

MEMORANDUM FOR ALL SQUADRON MEMBERS

SUBJECT: PHILOSOPHY OF COMMAND, COMMANDER'S MEMO #1

FROM: LIEUTENANT COLONEL JANE DOE, XYZ CADET SQUADRON COMMANDER

1. As the squadron commander, I believe it is important for me to provide some insights into my personal philosophies... where I am coming from and the focus and direction I desire to see the squadron take. The strength of our squadron is built upon the hard work and continued dedication of the squadron leadership, but the future success is contingent upon a positive, proactive and honest command climate. To do otherwise, leads to a state of disgruntlement, where cohesion breaks down, and a reaction to crisis becomes the norm. On the other hand, success will breed success.

2. The Squadron motto is "Lead the Way". Maintaining that level of success requires great attention to the priorities of training, leading, maintaining, caring; and the key words of teamwork, concern, positive attitude, high standards, and effective chain of command. The following are essential to realize our full potential.

a. Action-oriented Leadership. Each member of the chain of command and each staff member must take his/her role as a leader seriously. In turn, each leader must be a "doer", not merely a passive onlooker. Our cadets expect and deserve to be challenged to reach their full potential, where they will improve and find a sense of satisfaction and accomplishment. The squadron has no place for a complacent leader!

b. Proactive Spirit. Leaders who are action-oriented and clearly attuned to the critical nature of both the CAP mission and routine squadron operations will be able to stay "in control" and ensure high performance standards are met. Proactive spirit is simply taking charge to do the right thing and do it the way it was intended to be done.

c. Freedom to Grow. Achieving regular improvement will present new challenges and they may well lead to well-intended miscues or innovative ideas that did not work out as well as planned. Such problems are to be tolerated as part of personal and professional growth. Mistakes will not be tolerated where safety is jeopardized; poor judgment is evident; or the problem was a result of individual complacency, an inappropriate attitude, breach of integrity or ethics.

d. Open Communication. Accurate, timely and honest information must flow through the squadron...up and down. The communication process is perhaps the single most essential element in helping our squadron function efficiently and will be critical as we expand into a new facility. Develop a need and desire for information that will help you prepare properly and eliminate potential problems. Breakdowns, negativism's, and other detractors that affect communication must be avoided.

3. Time, experience and new knowledge result in changes. As we work together, my philosophy will become more elaborate and will adjust over time. Just as I can be counted upon to let you know if you have not lived up to my expectations, I expect each of you to let me know if I have failed to live up to my own philosophies. I challenge each of you to the task at hand and earnestly seek your support.

JANE DOE, Lieutenant Colonel, CAP  
Commander, XYZ Cadet Squadron

CC: All members  
Fig 2



## **Lesson Summary and Closure**

Commander's intent and command philosophy are vital tools to express your concept of the mission and your vision to your members clearly and concisely. It's something you use to stay focused and stay together.

### **EXERCISE:**

Form your own Commander's Intent statement using the CAP Memorandum format. Assume you are assuming command of your own unit. Remember, the purpose of Commander's Intent is to share your vision of the unit, mission and "what right looks like."

Take your Commander's Intent memo with you to the in-residence portion of the UCC (if you are in the blended course) or follow the instructions for submitting it (if you are in the online course). This assignment will be reviewed by the instructor and discussed among the students in class. This is a mandatory activity.