

Napoleon's Shadow

Facing Organizational Design Challenges in the U.S. Military

By JOHN F. PRICE, JR.

In the world of competitive triathlons, there is a saying: “You might not win the race in the swim, but you can certainly lose it there.” The maxim emphasizes how initial actions lay the foundation for success or failure. For leaders, decisions on organizational structure are similar to the triathlon swim; it may not be the key to organizational success, but failure to recognize the importance of structure selection and maintenance—and the impact it has on employee performance—could easily be the source of downfall.

Next to choosing the organization's strategy, the selection of organizational structure is arguably the next most important decision leaders make. In *Designing Organizations*, Jay Galbraith points out, “By choosing *who* decides and by designing processes influencing *how* things are decided, the executive shapes every decision made in the unit.”²¹ In today's fast-paced, competitive environment, organizations can ill afford to neglect the advantages that come from organizational design. Despite this reality, large traditional organizations such as the Department of Defense (DOD) continue to maintain stifling, rigid bureaucracies that hamstring talent and place the organization at a disadvantage.

Defensive Structures

While still the premier fighting force in the world, the U.S. military stubbornly retains organizational structures

that impede flexibility, adaptability, and creativity and undermine the execution of its operations in an increasingly challenging environment. In 2001, Major Eric Mellinger, USMC, wrote, “The modern military staff embodies the industrial age precepts of hierarchical, vertical flows of work and supervision.”²² This critique echoed the indictment leveled by General Anthony Zinni, USMC, the former commander of U.S. Central Command. He stated, “Napoleon could reappear today and recognize my Central Command staff organization: J-1, administrative stovepipe; J-2, intelligence stovepipe—you get the idea. The antiquated organization is at odds with what everyone else in the world is doing; flattening organization structure, decentralizing operations,

and creating more direct communications. Our staff organization must be fixed.”²³

Despite this acknowledgment of the problems generated by outdated structure, the military has continued to resist change in most sectors. This resistance is grounded in the daunting size of DOD, the natural inertia of the organization, and its accustomed use of the “vertical flow of control, facilitating dissemination of orders from top to bottom and ensuring compliance from bottom to top in a rapid efficient manner.”²⁴ Since this emphasis is unlikely to change, the key to getting leaders to adopt a new structure depends on showing the adverse impacts of the current structure on organizational performance and employee behavior and how both will improve through structural change. As a



U.S. Navy (Spike Call)

Army lieutenant colonel briefs commanding general Joint Task Force–Haiti on internally displaced persons camps in Port-au-Prince during Operation *Unified Response*

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RAND study pointed out, “The challenge for the U.S. military is to develop new organizational structures that achieve the efficiencies and creativity businesses have gained in the virtual and reengineered environments, while at the same time retaining the elements of the traditional, hierarchical, command and control system (for example, discipline, morale, tradition) essential for operations in the combat arena.”⁵

Beyond the Org Chart

To appreciate the impact of structural decisions, we must comprehend the multiple components of the structural dimension. According to recent research by Joseph Krasman, a comprehensive look at structure requires consideration of routinization, standardization, span of control, formalization, and centralization.⁶ Taken together, these components provide a significantly expanded concept of organizational structure, and it becomes easier to see how structure decisions have so much influence on employee behavior.

Leaders must also contend with the fact that organizational design is a continual process. As Galbraith points out, “Leaders must learn to think of *organize* as a verb, an active verb. Organizing is a continuous management task, like budgeting, scheduling or communicating.”⁷ Unfortunately, some organizations, especially large ones, continue to view organizational structure as a one-time, foundational decision that they are reluctant to revisit because of the extensive repercussions of organizational structure changes. However, the dangers of failing to adapt are much more significant than the inconveniences of structural change, even in a large hierarchical bureaucracy.

Impact of Inaction

While effective in the dissemination of top-down direction, the current military structure has numerous adverse impacts on the military members currently serving. At the individual level, the military’s hierarchical bureaucratic structure undermines creativity, hinders empowerment and sense of ownership, and fosters cynicism. The same organization that rapidly responds around the globe to the directions of senior officers provides almost no voice to the hundreds of thousands in the lower ranks. As a result, the organization’s adaptability and flexibility are significantly impaired because

navigational choices are addressed only by the most entrenched in the organization. Furthermore, the functional stovepipes that comprise the central columns of the organizational structure only serve to fracture teamwork, collaboration, and knowledge distribution. It is no surprise that then-Brigadier General Zinni and others argued, “In a crisis, the dusty wire diagram sitting atop most of our desks does not spring into action as one amorphous mass.”⁸

The current structure undermines the amazing talents of officer and enlisted Servicemembers by burying them under excess layers of supervision and constructing barriers to information exchange. Instead of creating opportunities, the oppressive structure stifles initiative and slowly drains talent from the organization. As Arno Penzia, Bell Laboratory’s chief scientist, states, “The problem with hierarchies is that people at every level have the power to say

Napoleon’s shadow and improve organizational design. However, in most cases, the structural adjustments were temporary fixtures stood up to address a specific contingency operation, acquisition program, or other “hot topic.” Interestingly, in many cases, these ad hoc organizations are cross-functional or matrixed structures specifically designed to cut through the day-to-day bureaucracy. Somehow, we have realized these reliable structures are preferred for crisis scenarios when speed, accuracy, and creative thinking are at a premium, but when the crisis ends, we return to the sluggish, stovepiped hierarchy.

One aspect that makes this more difficult is the challenge of transitioning the entire military structure. Instead of reforming one or even a set of organizational charts, adaptation for DOD would require the near simultaneous transition of thousands of organizational charts. The reality

despite the problems generated by outdated structure, the military has continued to resist change in most sectors

no.”⁹ The unfortunate reality in the military is that most of those people telling you “no” do not have the authority to tell you “yes,” but are still able to clog the arteries of the organization.

In a terrible irony, the effort by senior military leaders to smooth decisionmaking and improve control only results in slowing down the organization and stifling its ability to react to opportunities and threats. Instead of helping the organization, the structure fosters dependence and a greater need for direction from senior leadership. As Martin van Creveld states, “An organization with a high decision threshold—that is, one in which only senior officials are authorized to make decisions of any importance—will require a larger and more continuous information flow than one in which the threshold is low.”¹⁰ It is time for senior defense leaders to recognize the impediment that the organizational structure has become and consider the consequences of failing to change in the face of difficult economic pressures and myriad military threats.

Leaving Napoleon Behind

Over the last decade, the military has made a few feeble attempts to step out of

of this obstacle was seen in the recent efforts of U.S. Southern Command to reform its organizational structure. In a progressive attempt to depart from the Napoleonic stovepipes, Admiral James Stavridis created a matrixed organization focused on its primary mission areas. However, as soon as the Haitian earthquake crisis hit and extensive coordination was required with external agencies, the command reverted to the traditional J-structure mid-crisis primarily because of the structural misalignment with other DOD organizations. While some would use this example to derail future restructuring efforts, the real lesson lies in the need for a coordinated overhaul of the entire system, and that overhaul needs to start now.

Radical steps are required by defense leaders. In *Leading the Revolution*, Gary Hamel points out that “Nonlinear innovation requires a company to escape the shackles of precedent and imagine entirely novel solutions.”¹¹ For DOD, the novel solution is an adaptive organizational structure that flattens the hierarchy, empowers the membership, and fosters flexibility and creativity. This organizational design should consist of the following characteristics identified by

William Fulmer in his *Shaping the Adaptive Organization*:

- decentralization
- high spans of control
- extensive use of temporary structures
- powerful information systems
- constantly evolving structure.¹²

Decentralization removes the barriers to creativity and freedom of action, while wide spans of control reduce the layers of bureaucracy and keep senior officials more in touch with operations.¹³ Increasing the use of temporary structures enables adaptation and flexibility and indirectly provides a forum for structural experimentation within the organization. Information systems enable networking and collaboration in virtual structures and allow members to escape geographical or functional barriers. Finally, the establishment of structure as a variable instead of a fixed entity fosters a learning organization culture, which is vital in today's environment.

Act Now

While some would have us wait for the elusive “time of peace” to implement change, now is the perfect time to execute needed structural change in DOD. Budgetary contractions and impending personnel draw-downs demand increased efficiency and place a great deal of stress on the existing structure. Congressional pressure to reduce the bloat of the general/flag officer corps creates opportunities to eliminate excess structural layers. It is time to stop renting extra office space in Northern Virginia because the Pentagon staffs long ago outgrew one of the world's largest office buildings and start organizing for 21st-century operations.

While a comprehensive reform effort will involve all of DOD, the proper starting point for the process must be with the Joint Staff. As an extension of the Chairman, this staff serves as the interface with both the Service staffs collocated in Washington and the combatant command staffs distributed around the world. The Joint Staff helps to facilitate the interchange between the Services' organize, train, and equip missions; the combatant command's regional engagement operations; and the Office of the Secretary of Defense's guidance and policy. Organizational change efforts at this critical juncture will cascade into the partnering

organizations and promote a DOD-wide shift driven by the natural tendency of military organizations to seek alignment.

If we know it is time to restructure—and it appears the logical starting point is the Joint Staff—the question remains: what should the new structure look like? By following Louis Sullivan's maxim “form ever follows function,” we find our structural answer by looking at the core purpose of our military enterprise.¹⁴ If we filter through all of the creative language in the national strategy documents and observe how the organization is resourced, it is apparent that DOD is focused on two desired outcomes: win the current fight (in whatever form that may be), and prevent/prepare to win the next conflict—in order to secure America's global position. This description of the military's core purpose can be condensed down to two foundational concepts that form the basis for a new military structure: *execution* and *preparation*.

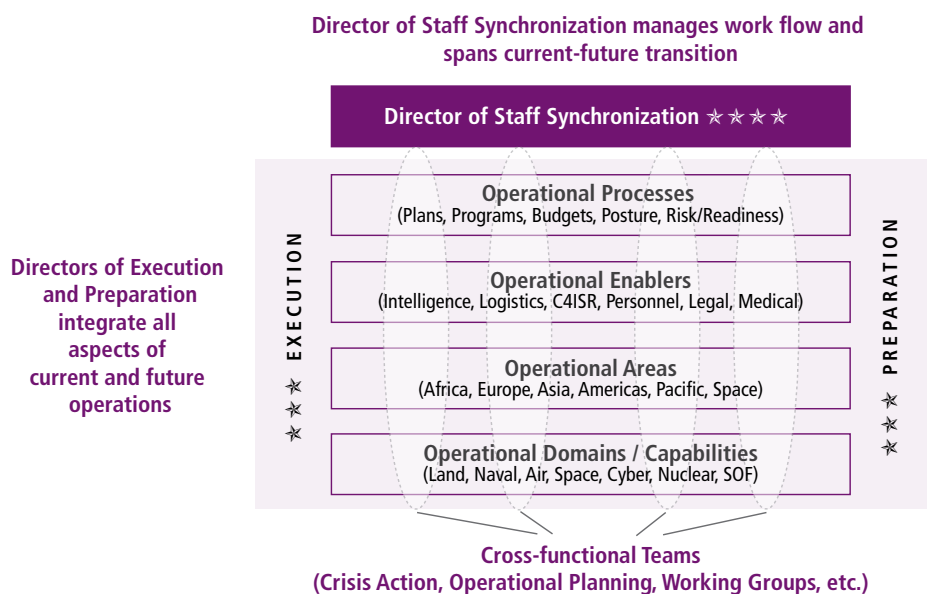
These two pillars are the major operating lanes on every staff and in every functional area. They represent the temporal separation we see between operational planning and execution, between procuring capabilities and employing them, and between recruiting and training personnel and deploying and employing personnel. If we look at DOD on a grand scale, it becomes clear that this preparation/execution divide is the primary separation between the Services and combatant commands. For the most part,

the combatant commands occupy the execution role as they employ today's force, while the Services are charged with the preparation role of generating tomorrow's force while sustaining today's. However, when we look at each organization's staff arrangement, we typically see execution centered on the J3 but also distributed across the staff, while preparation roles are scattered across the functional stovepipes.

The temporal dividing line must be the driving force in the staff reorganization effort instead of attempting to organize around the competing demands of geography and functional capabilities. The current system disperses parts of execution and preparation throughout the organization and desynchronizes the efforts. Even worse, because the system has aspects of execution laced across the organization, it results in every functional area gravitating to current operations, which causes the entire organization to dive to the tactical level. To avoid this reality, temporal separation, instead of functional “cylinders of excellence,” must be the basis for staff design. This simple bifurcation would significantly compress the staff structure to reflect priority of effort—again, execution and preparation. It would also reduce the problems of duplication of effort and information fratricide by eliminating the artificial barriers formed by the functional arrangement.

The implementation of this construct would result in the elimination of functional hierarchies on the military staffs. Instead

Decentralized, Cross-functional Staff Concept





Army colonel briefs commander of United Nations Stabilization Mission in Haiti

of having directorates focused on personnel, intelligence, logistics, and so forth, the revised staff would matrix each of these functions into the core areas of execution and preparation depending on its role. While functional leadership would still exist, the overall coordination of effort across the staff would be greatly simplified. The combatant commander or Chairman would be able to focus attention on two primary channels: current operations and future operations. The dividing line between current and future operations in this construct would differ significantly from present models. While some fluctuation would be needed to balance workloads, the baseline for current opera-

tions would be the present out to 6 months, where future operations would take the lead. The word *operations* in this construct has a greatly expanded meaning to include all aspects of military operations from budgetary planning and platform procurement to kinetic operations in a combat zone.

This staff is not intended to operate in functional areas. Instead, it is designed to operate like a joint task force or a cross-functional team that pulls together the desired expertise to address specific issues as they arise. Instead of continuing the current process of creating ad hoc groups every time an issue arises, team members are aligned in cells capable of working independently

or collectively in crisis. While this structure may seem foreign on initial review, there are numerous examples of it already residing in our staffs. The Pakistan-Afghanistan Coordination Cell is a perfect example of a highly effective cross-functional team that existed independently on the staff before recently being absorbed by the J5. Another example common to many staffs is the commander's action group. These multifunctional miniature think tanks, designed to tackle issues for senior commanders, are perfect examples of how a standing, matrixed team concept could be employed. Senior functional area experts would still be resident in the staff to assist with developmental and assignment issues, but the elimination of the functional directorates would remove barriers to collaboration and improve staff integration.

Transitioning the Joint Staff and combatant command staffs to this model would not be easy because it would remove numerous layers of the hierarchy and deal a serious blow to the functional stovepipes. However, the improvements in agility, collaboration, and end-to-end process management would be significant. Shifting our major staffs to focus on operational execution and preparation helps ensure unity of effort and continuity in plans, programs, and budgets.

While significant detail would need to be added to make this concept a reality, it is clear that this approach could provide several key benefits. First, it ensures the entire staff is focused on the core DOD mission and not divided by functional allegiances. Secondly, it ensures the return of a strategically focused staff by devoting a large portion of the staff to focus on future strategic development. The intentional temporal separation would be complemented by the consolidation of the staff, which would ensure sufficient connections to current operations to enable continuity of thought in concepts, planning, and lessons learned. Third, the consolidation of the staff into a single current and future operations group would enable the elimination of numerous general/flag officer positions that were previously required to lead the numerous directorates. Instead of serving as stovepipe chieftains, the remaining senior officers would be true generalists charged with facilitating the efforts of the cross-functional teams. Fourth, the removal of bureaucratic layers and duplication of effort combined with improved coordination would provide increased staff efficiency in the face



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Toward the Printed World: Additive Manufacturing and Implications for National Security

By Connor M. McNulty, Neyla Arnas, and Thomas A. Campbell

Additive manufacturing—commonly referred to as “three-dimensional printing”—is a fast-growing, prospective game-changer not only for national security but also for the economy as a whole. This form of manufacturing—whereby products are fabricated through the layer-by-layer addition of material guided by a precise geometrical computer model—is becoming more cost-effective and widely available. This paper introduces nontechnical readers to the technology, its legal, economic, and healthcare issues, and its significant military applications in areas such as regenerative medicine and manufacturing of spare parts and specialized components.



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of impending personnel cuts. Finally, and most importantly, the “practice like you play” maxim would finally be realized in the headquarters staffs as the agility, creativity, and expertise of the cross-functional teams seen during crisis response become the normal mode of operations.

Closing Thoughts

As this article is being written, the most substantial cuts in military spending in the last several decades are being considered, and the recent Quadrennial Defense Review stated that one of its two goals was “to further reform the Department’s institutions and processes to better support the urgent needs of the warfighter.”¹⁵ The need for structural reform combined with the fiscal demand for efficiencies, taken together, should provide sufficient motivation for leadership to consider resuming their responsibilities with regard to organizational design and revolutionize the antiquated structures in the Services. If we are truly serious about improving efficiency, saving taxpayer dollars, and taking care of our people, what could be better than doing all three by improving the organizational structure?

Think about the increased accessibility to leadership, the increased span of control, and the decentralization that would occur from this action. While the concept presented is only one of many options that could be pursued, it should be clear that there is great value in pursuing design ideas that break the mold of the past in order to make the organization more competitive and sustainable in the future. Do we have the courage to put structure back in the leadership discussion, or are we doomed to follow Napoleon through another century? **JFQ**

NOTES

¹ Jay Galbraith, *Designing Organizations: An Executive Guide to Strategy, Structure, and Process* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2002), 6.

² Eric Mellinger, “Cutting the Stovepipes: An Improved Staff Model for the Modern Unified Commander,” unpublished manuscript, April 2001, 31, available at <www.dtic.mil/cgi-bin/GetTRDoc?Location=U2&doc=GetTRDoc.pdf&AD=ADA401422>.

³ Anthony C. Zinni, “A Commander Reflects,” *U.S. Naval Institute Proceedings* 126, no. 7 (2000), 36.

⁴ Arthur Huber et al., *The Virtual Combat Air Staff: The Promise of Information Technologies* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 1996), 2.

⁵ *Ibid.*, xiii.

⁶ Joseph Krasman, “Taking Feedback-Seeking to the Next ‘Level’: Organizational Structure and Feedback-Seeking Behavior,” *Journal of Managerial Issues* 23, no. 1 (April 2001), 10.

⁷ Galbraith, 154.

⁸ Anthony C. Zinni, Jack W. Ellertson, and Robert Allardice, “Scrapping the Napoleonic Staff Model,” *Military Review* 72, no. 7 (1992), 84.

⁹ William Fulmer, *Shaping the Adaptive Organization* (New York: AMACOM, 2000), 184.

¹⁰ Martin van Creveld, *Command in War* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985), 236.

¹¹ Gary Hamel, *Leading the Revolution* (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 2000), 14.

¹² Fulmer, 179.

¹³ Mellinger, 25.

¹⁴ Steven Bradley, “Does Form Follow Function?” *Smashing Magazine*, March 23, 2010, available at <www.smashingmagazine.com/2010/03/23/does-form-follow-function/>.

¹⁵ *Quadrennial Defense Review Report* (Washington, DC: Department of Defense, February 2010), iii, available at <www.defense.gov/qdr/qdr%20as%20of%2029jan10%201600.pdf>.