



# COMMAND PAPERS

An ADF Command Philosophy Primer



CDLE - Centre for Defence Leadership and Ethics  
ADC - Australian Defence College

**AUSTRALIAN DEFENCE COLLEGE**  
**CENTRE FOR DEFENCE LEADERSHIP AND ETHICS**

The Centre for Defence Leadership Studies was established at the Australian Defence College (ADC) at the Weston Creek campus in January 2002. It moved to the UNSW@ADFA campus in May 2009 and was renamed the Centre for Defence Leadership and Ethics (CDLE) in June 2009 to reflect the increasing focus on ethics education in the ADF.

The role of CDLE is to provide the CDSS with corporate-level command, leadership and military ethics development advice in order to help shape expertise in these areas in the learning centre and across Defence in general.

***LEAD, SHAPE, ENGAGE***

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## **Foreword**

This ADF Command Philosophy Primer has been developed by CDLE over the last few years.

With each passing year, despite a degree of scepticism from some areas of the ADF, we become more convinced that a command philosophy is a good tool to refine and articulate exactly what you stand for as a commander in the ADF. We also believe that a command philosophy contributes to improving the command capability across the ADF. At the Australian Command and Staff College, students receive this Primer in the first month and are then able to reflect on, and discuss its contents, over the ensuing year.

The primer is not intended to be prescriptive because command is a very personal experience. What the primer does do is show how some commanders chose to tackle their command. We encourage you to read their approaches and think deeply about what is important to you in your command experience. You may decide not to promulgate what you write but you must practice it every day.

Good luck.



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## **An Australian Defence Force Command Philosophy Primer**

### **Introduction**

Taking command is an extremely personal business. From the moment a Commander is selected to command they will consciously or unconsciously begin to develop a practical command philosophy which will considerably influence both their personal life and work and the lives and work of the people below him/her. A new commander may choose to reveal this philosophy slowly through time and events, or may wish to establish a quick rapport by clearly defining their philosophy up front through verbal address and/or written guidance.

### **The purpose of a command philosophy**

The purpose of a command philosophy is to declare what you expect of your command. As such a command philosophy should not be rushed and needs to be carefully considered. A command philosophy is a very personal thing and for many commanders it requires serious inward reflection on personal values and goals, organisational expectations and objectives, the meaning of command and the CO's obligations to their subordinates. In addition, the nature and specifics of the command being undertaken and the unit itself will also shape the content of a command philosophy.

Whilst you may develop your command philosophy in private, the release of a written command philosophy is often a new CO's first and most obvious attempt to explain his/her expectations and set the command climate and culture of the ship.

A good command philosophy should:

- Provide a simple, unambiguous vision and direction for the ship.
- Indicate those aspects of organisational activity most important to the Commander.



- Give insight into the Commander's leadership style so others in the command can synchronise their actions with those of the Commander.
- Be broad enough to provide reference points for ethical, personal leadership style, and managerial style preference issues.
- Provide a foundation of understanding by which the Commander and their subordinates can build a relationship of respect, trust and mutual expectation.

It is important to note that a good command philosophy should not simply be a one-way list of expectations that the Commander has for their subordinates. Rather, it should also be a statement of what the Commander's subordinates can expect of the Commander - a two-way performance contract if you like.

In addition, Commanders must guard against command philosophies that simply state motherhood statements, such as 'embracing the ADF's values', without providing some firm direction and example as to what the Commander personally believes that to mean.

Most of all, a command philosophy that the Commander does not personally believe in, or does not intend to live and work by, should not even exist as it invites double standards and the charge of 'do as I say, not as I do'. The damage that will be done to a Commander's trust, respect and effectiveness in such a situation cannot be understated.

In general, a command philosophy has four components:

- **Vision.** Every organisation requires a vision to give meaning to why it exists. A commander's vision provides the initial common focus for an organization's energy and allows priorities to be determined and conditions set for ultimate success. A clear vision that is accepted and embraced by subordinates is one of the most important factors needed to take a group of people and turn them into a team.
- **Values.** Members in an organization who share the same values will view tasks from a common perspective and act accordingly. A commander has the responsibility to draw together the common values within his subordinates, making them robust enough to withstand external pressures and influences. This is the essence of values-based leadership



and it can be an extraordinarily powerful tool. The Navy and Defence values are an obvious place to start but remember motherhood statements are at best ineffective and at worst can be insulting.

- **Leadership expectations.** Subordinate leaders have specific responsibilities and fundamental obligations, and these must be clearly articulated and understood by them and their subordinates. By clearly articulating and reinforcing expectations a commander has the opportunity to create a positive leadership culture. Remember also that a good command philosophy should include your leadership responsibilities and obligations to make everyone aware that it is a two-way street.
- **Personal convictions.** A commander is expected to possess attributes such as integrity, humility, courage, fairness and diligence. A commander should also display social ease or 'people skills'. Not only must a commander's character be visible to subordinates, but they must understand the personal convictions of their commander to best be able to interpret and carry out their commander's intent.

### **Tips for developing a command philosophy**

A good command philosophy should be:

- Clear.
- Simple.
- Short.

Remember your audience and what you are trying to achieve. Keep your explanations short and to the point and your English simple and relevant. Most enlisted personnel (and many junior officers) are not going to plough through pages of paper to try and distil your 'essence'. It is tempting to try and discuss everything and offer detailed explanations of your expectations to your unit. This is understandable - but remember – the longer the document the less likely it will be read properly (if at all). Keep your philosophy clear, simple and short and expand upon the ideas within it via other means such as briefings, fireside chats, informal discussions with personnel during 'walk arounds' and most importantly, role modelling the behaviour you expect.



In addition, when developing your command philosophy think about:

- The previous CO's philosophy. What was it and was it successful? What are the similarities you can leverage off? What are the differences that might cause change to be necessary? Don't be tempted to change things just for change's sake.
- If it is truly achievable. Aspirational statements are useful in certain circumstances but your philosophy needs to be practical and achievable if people are going to believe in it and have their performance held to account against it.
- Getting input from your team. Can the XO, 2IC, SWO, RSM or HODs help and provide their input? They may know the unit and its existing command climate very well and be able to advise you on potential traps or pitfalls in implementing your philosophy. Importantly, they will need to truly believe in it if you want them to champion it and move the ship forward. Getting their input early is a great way of getting that important leadership group 'buy-in'. Ultimately the philosophy you develop and the decisions you make are yours alone but seek input – don't be a dictator if it can be avoided.

### **Some final tips for making your command philosophy work**

- Personally believe it – don't try and be someone you are not.
- Hold people's behaviour accountable to it and reward/sanction as necessary.
- Communicate, communicate, communicate.
- Continually reinforce it in your day-to-day behaviour – be a role model of your philosophy.
- Regularly review your behaviour against it to ensure you are on track and be prepared to admit to yourself and others when you are not.
- Regularly seek feedback from your officers and sailors/soldiers/airmen on whether the unit is on track. Invite frank and fearless feedback and listen to it!



- Get your senior leaders buy-in to help sell it. You need your senior officers and NCOs to champion your cause if you want it to really succeed.

### **Conclusion**

Command is so more than just ‘the next step’ in your career or an 18-month opportunity to prove that you ‘have what it takes’. How you approach your command will have a significant effect on every single individual in your unit. It will affect their morale and work performance, their intent to remain in the ADF or discharge, their view of what makes a good leader and their personal view of you as a person. Importantly, the way you approach your command will have lingering effects long after you leave.

Whether you choose to release one or not, sitting down, thinking about and writing down your command philosophy is an important step in preparing yourself for the job. A command philosophy should be relatively easy to craft as the men and women who get command have been working towards that goal for their entire career – as such you have likely already thought about many of these things.

Good luck.