Maneuverists for Agility

The Marine Corps needs to adapt and innovate
by GySgt Brandon Smart, Maj Peter Thermos,
Capts Aaron Barlow & Jon Margolick

The *Commandant's Planning Guidance* (Washington, DC: HQMC, July 2019) makes clear that the Marine Corps needs to adapt and innovate. We know that the call to innovate is not a new one. We stand on the shoulders of giants like Maj Pete Ellis, LtGen Victor "Brute" Krulak, and Gen James N. Mattis among many others. All these leaders changed the fabric of our Corps through intellect and adaptation. As an institution, we cannot afford to wait on the next brilliant mind to come along for us to change. We are an organization built on tradition. The fundamental element of that tradition is victory in our Nation's battles. The status quo threatens that tradition. We exist in an organization that encounters new ideas with suspicion, is totally risk-averse, and insists upon a rigid structure for action and learning that denies the full value of our most precious resource, the individual Marine. To sustain innovation, we must drastically change our culture, encourage risk taking, and cultivate an environment where we reward bold thinkers. Above all, it must become obvious to our Marines that they bring value to the team every single day. Through this culture shift, we can sustain innovation past the next great idea. We can continuously improve through the initiative of our Marines and refine the organization from the bottom up. In this article, we discuss some of these obstacles to innovation and proposed solutions.

The very word, "innovation" has become as much a part of our lexicon as any other. Common approaches across the Corps take the form of appointing innovation action officers or creating physical spaces dedicated to innovation. Often, from these top-down efforts, commanders want to see tangible outputs such as new equipment or processes. We assert that this is fundamentally the wrong approach to innovation. Somehow, in contradiction of everything our doctrine teaches, innovative behavior has become the tightly overseen province of headquarters groups and commanders. Rather than thinking in this top-down manner, we must think of innovation in the same way we approach decentralization on the battlefield. We must allow all Marines the creative maneuver space to apply their intellect and will to the complex problems of the future.

Some will point to things like additive manufacturing capabilities as innovation. The potential benefits are apparent but not fully leveraged. One significant advantage is the potential to reduce the amount of Class IX supply support required to support maintenance activity with 3D printing. The coming years may see that result. However, if we were a truly innovative organization, we could get there much faster. How? By cutting our Marines loose on the problem. Rather than waiting for Systems Command to produce, test, and approve every part, lead Marines to design and build a part, hang the part on the equipment, and test the equipment. Will they sometimes fail? Absolutely, but as leaders, we must encourage them to continue to drive us toward the solution. The leader that praises the Marine who attempted something new and failed must get to the root cause of the problem and remove the barrier that is blocking our process. We can learn from methods such as the Toyota Production Systems and lean production; let our people solve our problems.[1] By empowering Marines to own the solutions to the issues we face, we will become better every day.

>GySgt Smart is the Deputy Director of the Centers for Adaptive Warfighting at NavalX in the office of the Assistant Secretary of the Navy for Research, Development, and Acquisition.

>>Maj Thermos is a Logistics Officer currently serving as the Company Commander of Motor Transport Maintenance Instruction Company, Marine Corps Combat Service School.

>>>Capt Barlow is a Combat Engineer Officer and is currently serving as Company Commander of Engineer Maintenance Company, 2d Maintenance Battalion, 2d Marine Logistics Group.

>>>>Capt Margolick is a Judge Advocate serving as the Director of the Centers for Adaptive Warfighting at NavalX.

Skeptics will doubt the initiative of Marines. Under the current cultural paradigm, they have every right to think this way. We consistently suppress initiative and risk-taking in favor of seeking certainty and maintaining control.[2]

Drawing parallels between the way we understand war and the way we fight may illustrate how naturally the required change flows from what we already preach, teach, and practice. Clausewitz describes war as a chaotic environment characterized by friction and uncertainty.[3] We combat this chaos, seek opportunity, and out-cycle our enemies through decentralized command and control.[4] We must allow subordinate initiative and decision making to achieve tempo and outpace the enemy.[5] Yet, when not confronted with an immediate enemy, we default away from these doctrinal impulses toward policy, compliance, and centralized decision making. Given the battlefield benefits, why are we so far from a decentralized model as an enterprise?

to change. The tension and resistance to keep the status quo have resulted in many of our most talented Marines leaving the service out of frustration with the current system. Many who remain in the Marine Corps accept the system as is and continue to row the boat without attempting to take ownership of transforming our organization. This lack of ownership has slowly resulted in accepting many of the unproductive operating methods that take place across the Marine Corps. Unsustainable staff battle rhythms, endless meetings, PowerPoint slides, and Outlook emails are the orders of the day despite universal acknowledgment that they are often inconsistent with our reputation for excellence or, indeed, with getting the job done. Industry leaders such as Amazon, Apple, and Google rapidly outpace the industrial-military complex. We can see their progress, but we have not yet learned how they achieve their results. Our outdated policies have trapped the Marine Corps into operat-

(note: not the same thing as "easy") steps from being world-class maneuverists for agility. And, in the spirit of innovation, we have road-tested a few ideas. in that direction. Together, and with the support of leadership from 2d Marine Logistics Group (2d MLG), Marine Corps Combat Service Support Schools, the II MEF Information Group, and the Naval Expeditions Agility Cell (NavalX) in the office of the Assistant Secretary of the Navy for Research, Development, and Acquisition, we have formed a group that we call the Centers for Adaptive Warfighting (CAW).

This collaborative effort known as the CAW focuses on best practices from industry, field-stripping them for entry-level classes in which every Marine can practice the material and has a chance to excel. The courses are free, taught by committed volunteers with a flair for the front of the classroom and a proven ability to use the tools, and are designed to accomplish more than classroom instruction: we send home practitioners, and call on them to produce measurable results at their units. More than ninteen in every twenty graduates surveyed would recommend these courses to a friend or colleague. In course critiques, we hear things like, "This is one of the best leadership tools I've seen in my 22 years in the Marine Corps," or "I learned more about leadership than in a four-year undergraduate degree in Business Administration."

> ## *Our outdated policies have trapped the Marine Corps into operating in a system that is unresponsive to change and hampers innovation.*

Despite decentralization and iterative thinking at the lowest levels being ingrained in the DNA of our profession as it relates to warfare, we are wildly unsuccessful at implementing this philosophy away from the battlefield. Our Industrial Age system of slow-moving, rigid, or stagnant processes is not capable of delivering the adaptive qualities required for the disruptive changes acknowledged in the *Commandant's Planning Guidance*. While higher-level staff and general officers may be alive to the urgency and may even feel they have been given the reins they need to make headway, those feelings are not widespread. The apathetic atmosphere of process and procedure has led many Marines to lose the mindset of owning problems and, in some cases, to leadership that stifles initiative and is resistant

ing in a system that is unresponsive to change and hampers innovation.

In his 1976 essay "Destruction and Creation," John Boyd outlined the intellectual framework and concepts that would later become the well-known OODA loop. The basic argument Boyd presents in the essay is that for new ideas to be created, old ideas must be challenged and torn down. As John Boyd's ideas transformed our doctrine of maneuver warfare, we can again return to his wisdom to escape the current intellectual rut. We must seek to apply these concepts more broadly to enact change. Private sector actors have coopted these fundamental ideas, transposed them for application in civilian environments, and rebranded them as "agility." We need to take back what was rightfully ours. We are a few straight-forward

Lesson 1: You and your team do not have to do all the thinking. Let others into the room, and do not start from scratch if you do not have to.

Our course in Warfighter-Centered Design adopts techniques taught at business and design schools across the country and practiced at companies across the Fortune 500. The goal is simple: make it easy for us to listen to each other, regardless of rank, station, or MOS, in order to build collaborative teams, identify problems worth solving and generate potential paths forward. We started with the Navy's Illuminate Thinkshop. In this three day course, students go from being introduced to design thinking methods to facilitat-

ing workshops for other Marines. We end with an explanation of how these tools supplement or instantiate existing Marine Corps doctrine on decision making and leadership. Throughout, we show how to shape and brief the ideas born out of this creative process. What difference does it make? On day one, we ask our students who would know how to "go out and innovate," if directed to do so. Typically, one student in ten half-raises a hand. On day three, we ask again; invariably, every hand goes up. There is nothing revolutionary about this, except some of the trappings; our instructors and students go by first names during their time in the classroom, and (perhaps) the thrust of the course, which is about letting deck plate practitioners own the discussion and asking leadership to ensure their voices are heard. But the essential insight is old hat: train hard and use rigorous methods to decentralize ruthlessly and responsibly. As always, we have been pleasantly surprised by the results.

Lesson 2: You cannot predict the future, and you do not have to be sure what is going to work. Do not let uncertainty rob you of a bias for action. Make smaller, risk-worthy bets, aggressively test ideas, and harvest the winners.

Now, how to manage those ideas? Our Mission Accelerator Course (MAC) is built from the lessons of I-CORPS, a National Security Administration program with more than 4,000 graduates

Sharing experiences, helping them to grow as Marines is an important step toward team unity. (Photo by Cpl Maricela Veliz.)

or services under conditions of uncertainty" could be approached through a rigorous scientific process, buying down risk (of failure, or of customer rejection) through meticulous experimentation.[6] For teams operating in environments in which the problem sets, customers or adversaries, tools, and measures of success are undefined or dynamic, this methodology provides reliable doctrine for finding and blazing effective trails. Commanders should not have to do all the thinking themselves; by pairing Warfighter-Centered Design with MAC, they can oversee a pipeline of vetted, high-impact ideas from their

and make every task fight for its right to your time. The acid test: whether it makes a difference for the people who depend on you and your teams.

How shall we manage our chaotic processes of ideation and testing? For that matter, how could we better manage all our chaotic processes? Our Military Scrum Master course offers just such a mission and task management tool. Named after the tight-knit group of players who coordinate to push the ball down the field in rugby, Scrum was created decades ago for the world of software development by Jeff Sutherland and Ken Schwaber. While Sutherland's book, *Scrum: The Art of Doing Twice the Work in Half the Time*, is a common point of entry to the material, they have released the concept under a Creative Commons license, and numerous military practitioners have extended it to more readily apply to the work we do.[7] Our Military Scrum Master course is built on lessons from CDR Jon Haase, USN, who commanded EOD Mobile Unit 2 when he implemented Scrum.[8] The tool tracks all available work, all work currently in process, and the effectiveness (or lack thereof) of completed work. By continually asking both customers and team members, "How can we do this better?" Scrum makes it possible to

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in the Intelligence Community. The National Security Administration's program is itself based on the National Science Foundation's program of the same name. Both were built in collaboration with Steve Blank and Eric Ries, successful Silicon Valley entrepreneurs who realized that "developing new products

subordinates, with confidence that the resultant projects will be effectively assessed for potential, and either expanded if successful or, if not, cheaply put to bed.

Lesson 3: Focus on teamwork, make your work visible, prioritize rigorously,

eliminate work that does not matter and four or more times as much of the work that does.

Scrum was our first expansion beyond the WCD course. An agile methodology, Scrum is a tool to lead and manage a team through the accomplishment of a diverse set of tasks. Still, even in its infancy, we have already seen this tool produce results as teams have adopted it at 2d Maintenance Battalion, 8th Engineer Support Battalion, 2d MIG, the School of Infantry-West, MARSOC, Inspector-Instructor stations, Headquarters Marine Corps, and elsewhere. That is in addition to groups like First Battalion, First Marines, who found the tool on their own and used it throughout their deployment to Marine Rotational Force-Darwin; Mobile EOD Unit 2, in Norfolk, where we found the first successful implementation; MARCORSYSCOM, where the Agile Center of Excellence and several of their internal teams use it to manage their development work; the Force Readiness Analytics Group, in the office of the Commander, Naval Air Forces; and an increasing number of offices throughout the Department of the Navy. It has worked elsewhere, and we now know it works here. In just months, teams at 2d Intelligence Battalion and 2d Maintenance Battalion

were able to quantitatively demonstrate over 400 and 700 percent increases in productivity, respectively.

Becoming Maneuverists for Agility

A month ago, we were pitching a gunnery sergeant on joining on our Scrum class. We gave him the standard pitch: "What if we told you that you could do twice the work in half the time?" We expected incredulity. Instead, he said: "Obviously." What he told us is a reliable refrain among Marines we talk to: our systems for managing work, and navigating paths forward, are so confusing and wasteful that it is easy to believe there is a much, much better way. Something like the CAW was, and remains, inevitable. As the demand for new ideas and methods of doing business are ready for something to make it happen. The growth of our courses is further testament. Since June 2019, we have developed a training schedule throughout 2020 and have expanded our capacity to three different locations where the CAW teaches its courses: Camp Lejeune, Camp Pendleton and headquartered in Alexandria, VA. The CAW is now scheduled throughout fiscal year 2020 with courses in WCD, Military Scrum Master, and MAC at all locations. As an instructor group of volunteers with other primary respon-

sibilities at our commands, we found that the demand for what we teach was outgrowing our capacity. This only drew in more volunteer teachers, as they can see that Marines want and need what they can offer, and the time they spend makes a difference. This volunteer mechanism at the point of need is evidence to not only the self-selection of tasks and mission we preach necessary in our methodologies, but also a glimpse into the desires of people who want to enact change and work hard to get there.

We are discovering that what we offer is a view of a much larger idea. We are about changing this organization through a positive culture shift. We are about solving the problems of tomorrow, but we do not insist on doing it ourselves: That's the province of those we train and enable. We further recognize that we are not some kind of infallible authority on innovation. Our end state is not a certificate in the hands of Marines and Sailors across the Marine Corps that says they are certified to innovate. Our end state is a shift in culture that allows all Marines and Sailors to innovate, and it is in line with Gen David H. Berger's vision for the Marine Corps. We encourage others to try what we have done. Try something new, fail, learn, and try again. Together we own the culture of the Marine Corps, and we own the solution to improving it. Rather than control the direction of innovation, we hope to be a catalyst for the start of innovation.[9]

"Military operations move at the speed of trust."[10] We call on you to embrace these words of wisdom and test new ways to place trust in your Marines and Sailors. A culture that emphasizes trust in Marines to solve problems will take this organization to unparalleled heights. We will truly be able to say that we are an intellectually driven organization that can sustain innovation in the 21st century. We will develop better Marines and outpace our enemies. Above all, we will maintain our proud tradition of winning our nation's battles. We do not know precisely how, yet, but we know what first steps produce results, and we intend to teach and lead others exploit those opportuni-

They may not have the same experiences to draw on as their seniors; that doesn't make them second-class Marines. (Photo by Sgt Russell Blacketer.)

ties and resultant capabilities wherever they lead. That is how we will change the way Marines do business. That is what it means to maneuver for agility.

Notes

1. James P. Womack, et al., *The Machine That Changed the World: the Story of Lean Production—Toyotas Secret Weapon in the Global Car Wars That Is Revolutionizing World Industry,* (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 2007).

2. Martin E. Dempsey and Ori Brafman, *Radical Inclusion: What the Post-9/11 World Should Have Taught Us About Leadership,* (Quantico, VA: Missionday, 2018).

3. Carl von Clausewitz, *On War,* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989).

4. Headquarters Marine Corps, *MCDP 6, Command and Control*, (Washington, DC: 1996).

5. Headquarters Marine Corps, *MCDP 1-3, Tactics*, (Washington, DC: 1997).

6. Eric Ries, and Ursula Bischoff, *Lean Startup: How Today's Entrepreneurs Use Continuous Innovation to Create Radically Successful Businesses*, (New York, NY: Random House Inc., 2011).

7. Jeff Sutherland, *Scrum: The Art of Doing Twice the Work in Half the Time,* (New York, NY: Penguin Random House, 2014).

8. J.J Sutherland, *The Scrum Fieldbook: A Master Class on Accelerating Performance, Getting Results, and Defining the Future,* (New York, NY: Penguin Random House, 2019).

9. Ori Brafman and Rod A. Beckstrom, *The Starfish and the Spider: The Unstoppable Power of Leaderless Organizations,* (New York, NY: Portfolio, 2006).

10. James N. Mattis and Francis J. West, *Call Sign Chaos: Learning to Lead,* (New York, NY: Random House, 2019).

>*Author's Note: One might compare this theory of innovation to Thomas Carlyle's "Great Man" theory of history, which held that "the history of the world is but the biography of great men." Leaving aside obvious problems with who he was inclined to include, the theory of causation was essentially the same, with similar implications for how much—really, how little—would be required of the rest of us.*

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