

## Command Message Development

The command chain must always be considered when writing command messages. For what command and for what purpose should be your prime considerations.



## Unit Introduction

Command Messages are the very threads that you will weave into the tapestry of your total communications plan. The pattern will evolve from your command's **vision and mission statements**, adding texture to command's **priorities** and presenting a tableau of the **commander's intent**.

Throughout the unit there will be references to the Army's Training and Doctrine Command (TRADOC) and how it approaches the above three areas and samples of the command's **themes, command messages** and **talking points**. In addition, there will be **quotes** from the TRADOC commander in support of the overall communication's effort.

## Objectives

Given a public affairs scenario, develop effective command messages that are **newsworthy**, **understandable** and **immediately actionable** for use in communicating information about the scenario to identified target audiences. By the conclusion of this unit, the student will be able to:

- Define a command message
- Use a command message

## Overview

What you will need to do is know all, or at least a majority, of the following. That is what this unit will provide:

- Definitions
- Components of a Message
- Developing Command Messages
- Developing a Response
- Practical Application

## Definitions

Here are some definitions involved in the topic.

**Command** - Any order given by a commander; that is, the will of the commander expressed for the purpose of bringing about a particular action.

Merriam-Webster defines "command" as:

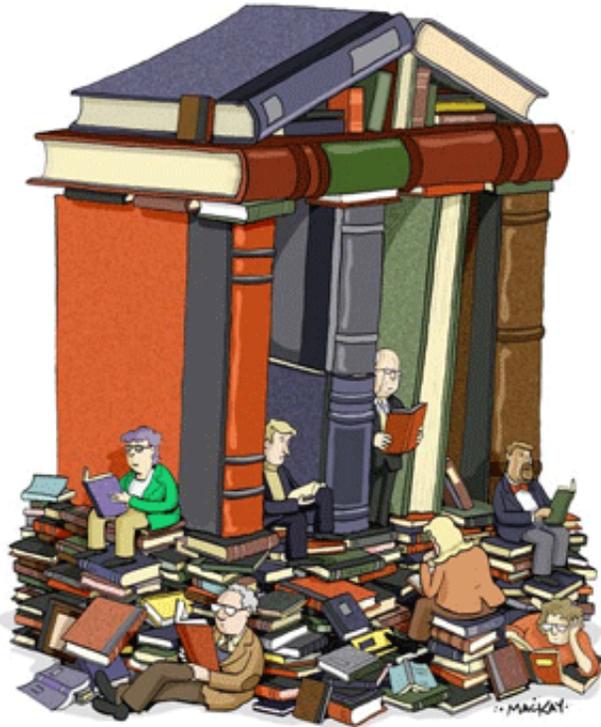
1. To direct authoritatively
2. Order. To exercise a dominating influence over; have command of, as:
  - o to have at one's immediate disposal
  - o to demand or receive as one's due commands a high fee
  - o to overlook or dominate from or as if from a strategic position
  - o to have military command of, as a senior officer.

**Message** – Any thought or idea expressed briefly in a plain or secret language and prepared in a form suitable for transmission by any means of communications.

Merriam-Webster defines "message" as:

1. a communication in writing, in speech or by signals
2. a messenger's errand or function
3. an underlying theme or idea.

Put the two terms together and you get a "Command Message." Statements or information you work into responses that explain the command's position on a particular issue or event. What an organization does can be reported as quickly as what an organization says – that's why we need public affairs; to inform internal and external publics of the action, to persuade those publics to support and accept the actions and possibly to instruct publics in skills needed to translate intention into action.



After much research, here is, maybe not the definitive definition, but one that should be used.

**“Command Message”**: A communication that supports the intent of the commander and the organization he or she serves. Command Messages are directly or indirectly linked to a single issue or to multiple issues confronting the organization.

Command Messages are designed to help clearly communicate official positions on various topics in ways that are clearly understood by the target audiences that are most directly impacted or concerned with the issues at hand. In this way, Command Messages are driven by situations. When public affairs officers are confronted with various situations, they develop Command Messages to communicate the positions of their commanders and their organizations in relation to the particular issues at hand.

As an example, Military Analyst Captain James E. Hutton, from the Center for Army Lessons Learned, says public affairs professionals should keep the following things in mind when preparing command messages:

- What does the commander want the diverse public(s) to understand about this installation, exercise, operation, event? What is the intended message?
- Who are the key publics interested in this subject?
- What is the higher headquarters stated position(s) on the possible subjects?



Lessons learned are always a great help in developing anything, e.g., either you want, or don't want history to repeat itself. In this case, Charles Moose, then police chief of Montgomery County, Md., is also Major Charles Moose, commander of the Air National Guard's 113th Security Forces Squadron at Andrews AFB. Md. Here he shares the leadership lessons he learned during the "Beltway Sniper" investigation of 2003 with Air Combat Commander leaders.

## The "G" in PAG gives direction

Command Messages can also be found in Public Affairs Guidance (PAG) and are used anytime you address any of your publics. Previously learned in the Introduction to Communications unit: We cannot not communicate. So armed with that information, we need to be prepared to communicate the command's position in everything we do.

- Media
- Internal Information
- Community Information
- Information Operation
- PAG

Now that we have taken a look at some definitions we use to help us understand what a command message is, let's take a look at three components that make up an effective command message.

## Components of a Command Message

Communication strategy aims at **informing** – both internal and external publics; **persuading** – through accurately provided information – those publics to support and accept the action; and possibly even to instruct those publics in the skills needed to translate intention into action. The three components combined contribute to the value of a message.

- **Newsworthiness:** Reinforce the 14 Characteristics of News presented during the “Nature of News” unit (Consequence, Interest, Timeliness, Proximity, Prominence, Surprise, Affect, Effect, Secrecy, Conflict, Reporter’s Interest, Mistakes, Change, and Editor’s Perspective).
- **Understandable:** Sound bite, clear, concise, honest, simple, avoid absolutes, **don’t speculate EVER**
- **Immediately Actionable:**
  1. Mutually Beneficial:
  2. Win – Win situation. Both the organization and its publics can benefit.
  3. Content should be framed in such a way that the information answers questions, responds to audience interests and concerns, and empowers members of the audience to act on their interests and concerns. This cannot be done without consideration of the newsworthiness and without making the information easily understandable. Also make sure you link your message content to Strategic Objectives whenever you see the opportunity.

## Some examples of Command Messages



Command messages are as varied as the topics they cover. But on the following pages you will find some samples of command messages that will cover some of the more common themes you will encounter in your career.

### **People:**

They are professionals who are committed to their country, their mission and their colleagues.

They are patriotic, superbly trained and they make personal sacrifices to serve their country.

They represent the best that America has to offer.

Our people are responsible for the success of our mission.

We have some of the best and most highly trained people in the world.

People are the cornerstone of the service.

No matter how technical our operations become or how wide our global missions expand, our people will continue to be our most treasured resource.

By continuing to provide loyal and dedicated service to their country, our people serve as positive role models for society.



## **Command Message samples**

### **Justice**

We are committed to the pursuit of justice put forth in the U.S. constitution.

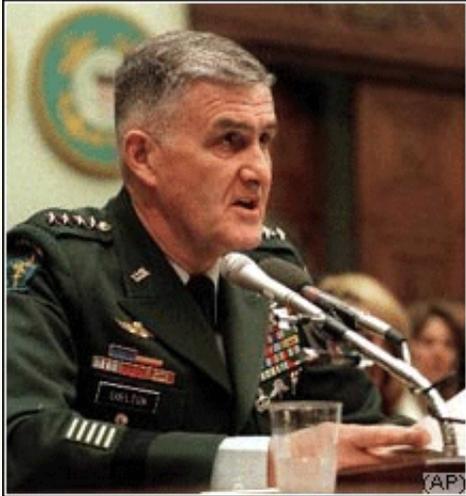
We set high standards for our people and we won't tolerate those who fall short of those standards.

While the final decision hasn't been made yet, we're confident all the facts will be considered and evaluated in an impartial manner. The results will be fair and just.

Our legal system is fair, impartial and just. It is dedicated to just dealings and to take the right actions...to do the right thing.

We uphold the rights our of service members, while holding accountable those who break the law.

The military justice system will make every effort to do the right thing (on behalf of the accused).



## Command Message Samples

### Policy:

#### Policy, as regards equal opportunity:

We are committed to practicing and promoting equal opportunity.

We provide the opportunity for our people to contribute to their maximum potential while serving their country.

The *service* reflects the diversity of American society, but we are all members of one team.

#### Policy, as regards sexual harassment:

We do not tolerate sexual harassment, period.

We are proactive in limiting harassment through periodic training and awareness sessions; but if problems do occur, we are quick to respond and hold our people accountable.

Sexual harassment has no place in today's *service*.



## **Command Message Samples**

### **Training:**

Training is the foundation for everything we do.

Training prepares us for whatever mission we may be tasked with, wherever the president may send us.

Daily training, conducted in realistic environments, under realistic circumstances, ensures our forces maintain the highest levels of proficiency and readiness for worldwide deployment.

Also go back and reference the pdf file on TRADOC's training messages.



## **Command Message samples**

### **Safety:**

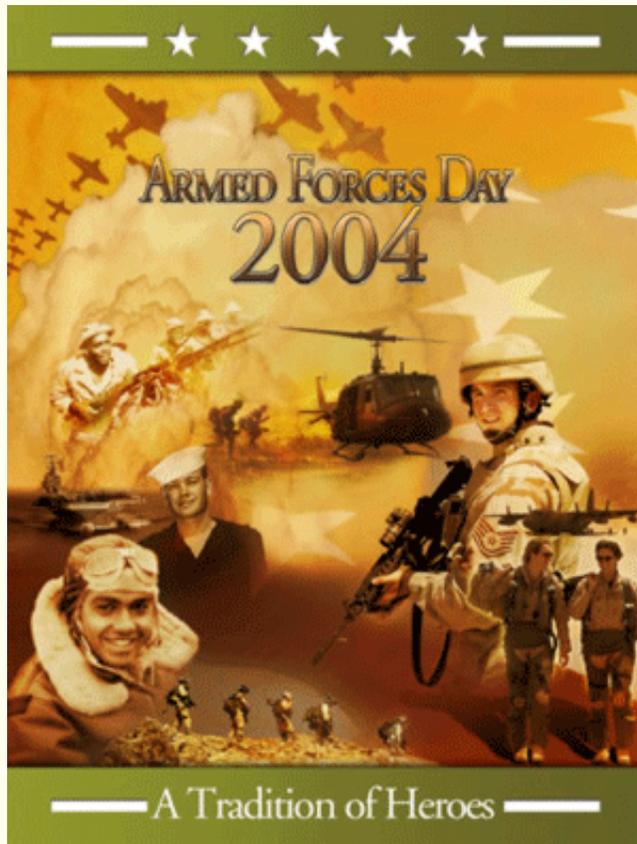
We are committed to providing the safest possible working environment for our people.

The safety of our people and the surrounding communities is one of our foremost concerns.

Our stringent safety standards help ensure the well being of our people and the communities we interact with.

People are our most valuable resource and the military is committed to protecting them.

Safety is paramount - no one is more concerned with our people than we are.



## Command Message samples

### Community Relations:

We are committed to building positive relationships with the communities surrounding our bases, as we, too, are members of this community.

Our service members and their families are a major part of each community, and they have a vested interest in its health because they live and work in this community.

We strive to be good neighbors and positive role models within this community by taking every opportunity to participate in local events and organizations.

### Tax Dollars:

The service consistently strives to be good stewards of the taxpayers' dollars.

Through technological advances and continuous analysis of the way we do business, we seek out and implement policies that ensure taxpayers get the

best military for their money.

The cost associated with maintaining the world's most capable military force is not cheap. Two of our primary concerns have been, and will continue to be, efficiency and effectiveness, which ultimately result in savings and good stewardship of tax dollars.

### Base Closure:

This base has enjoyed a long and prosperous relationship with the community. We want to ensure a smooth transition as we close this chapter in our history. We will continue to work closely with the community as the base takes on a new identity. We will continue to play an active role in the community until the last person leaves.



## Condolences

When the command faces a death of a unit member, it is very important to send condolences to the loved ones of the deceased. Condolences, either spoken or written, reach out to other service members, friends, family and other near ones, with faith, hope and sympathy. They are tailored to each individual case and its circumstances. Command messages are meant to convey broader themes, crafted to emphasize mission or the commander's intent.



## Command Message samples

### Cooperation:

The Coast Guard, Navy, Army, Air Force and Marines maintain open lines of communications with each other in a joint situation and with such agencies as Customs and Immigration, the Drug Enforcement Agency, Home Land Security and other civilian agencies during natural disasters. The same kind of cooperation is found when dealing with our allies.



## Command Message samples

### Environment:

Being good stewards of the environment is a major concern and serious commitment for the *service*.

We share the environment with the community and are committed to ensuring we take the necessary precautions to prevent adverse effects on the environment and the habitat.

We live here too - we breathe the same air, drink the same water as our neighbors outside the front gate.

We are good stewards of the environment.

We have always complied with the best environmental cleanup practices of the time, but as laws and technologies change, we are going back and cleaning up old sites to meet today's stricter standards.

We work hard to defend our nation and to protect the environment. The two are not mutually exclusive.



Photo courtesy: Steve Effers, "Army Times"

## **Command Message samples**

### **Investigation:**

The purpose of this investigation is to determine what caused the accident so we can take steps in the future to prevent a similar outcome.

We are not rushing to judgment about the cause.

An ongoing investigation is being conducted by trained professionals.

The investigation will take time and will be thorough.

The goal is to find out what happened and why, so we can prevent any future accidents.

We will make every effort to prevent another incident, or loss of life.

### **Investigation cooperation:**

We are working with local, state and federal agencies to ensure a thorough and efficient investigation is conducted to determine the cause of the accident and ensure that something like this doesn't happen again.



## Command Message samples

### Response Time:

We have the ability to respond rapidly to meet any challenge we're given. We can rapidly deliver combat power or humanitarian assistance globally, anytime, anyplace.

### Humanitarian Missions:

We're proud to be participating in *this mission*. The chance to help alleviate suffering and save lives is extremely important.

Our troops continuously train to deliver people and supplies, and this life-saving effort is an excellent opportunity to put that training to use.



## **Command Message samples**

### **Technology:**

We have the ability to use the most advanced technology on the planet to meet our mission objectives.

We must continue to hone America's technological edge.

When we develop new technologies, we're strengthening our defense and bolstering our national economy.

Technology plays an important part in our nation's defense - technology saves lives.

## Developing an Effective Response

A lot of those sample Command Messages cover a multitude of situations.

A response is composed of two parts:

1. Information (facts, figures, costs, etc.)
2. Command Message (your organization's policy or position)

When you are asked a question about a subject, consider it an opportunity to provide both basic information and your position to the questioner.

For example, here's a question:

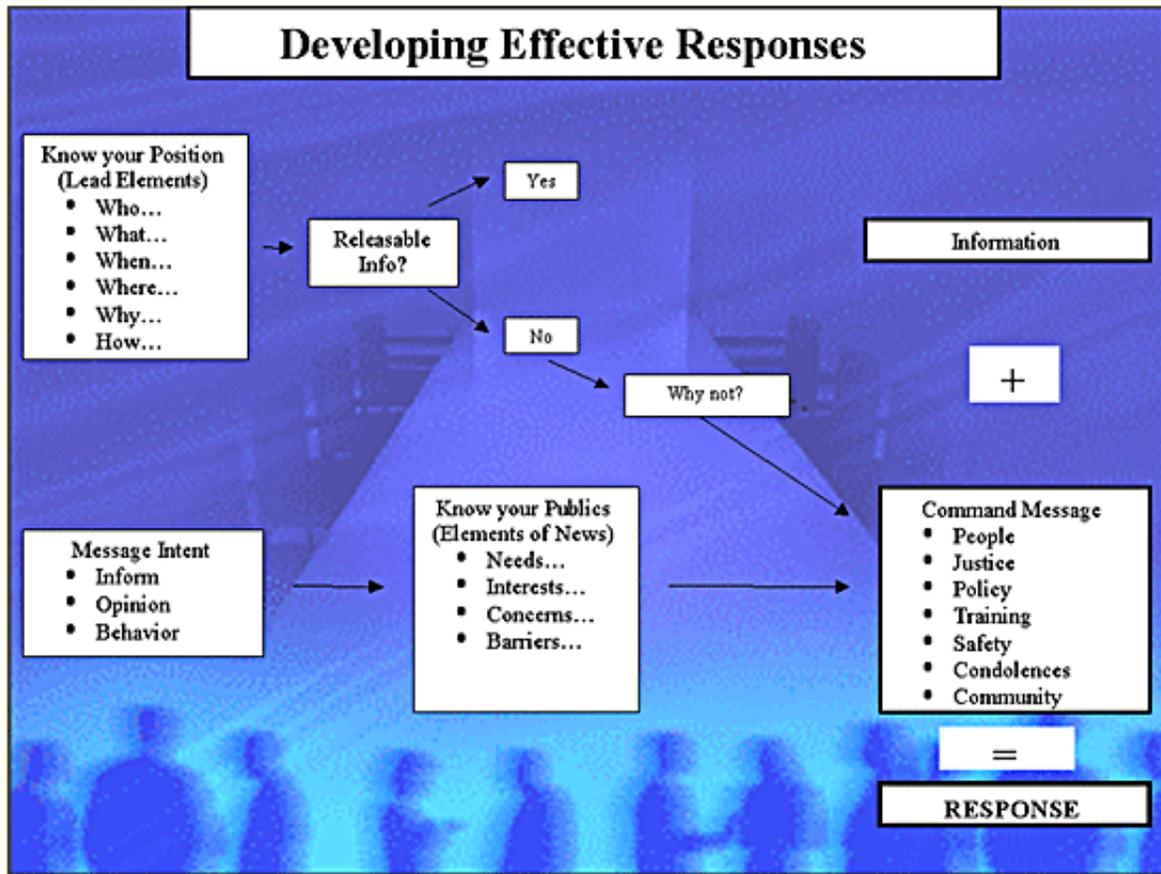
**Q:** How much did the Air Force spend on this new dormitory?

**A: (information)** The new living quarters for our enlisted troops cost \$200,000. **(command message)** We now have adequate accommodations for our young enlisted members who had been forced to live in dilapidated World War II barracks. This dormitory provides comfortable, well-lit rooms for men and women who work long hours to defend our country.

Now that we have talked about some examples let us talk about how to develop a "response" that contains an appropriate Command Message

- Know your position or policy intimately:
  1. Examine your facts: Who, what, when, where, how and why
  2. Research: History of your organization, relationships with publics
  3. Goals for public: Effect their information, opinion, behavior
- Know your publics: (Target Audiences...Internal, External, Shadow, etc.)
- Consider Barriers: No communication or action can be carted about like a trunk of clothes and fitted to a new situation, time, place or audience. Because a command message worked once, does not mean it is good for a variety of situations. You must consider the unique current situation, the time, the place and the audience you're dealing with. You must use careful selection of media and techniques
- Craft your response to address directions, doubts or concerns your audience might have.

Now let's put it all together in a model that will outline the process.



## **Interim Review**

Review and define – to your satisfaction – the following terms.

**Command:**

**Message:**

**Command Message:**

**Response is made up of what two components?**

## The Answers

Did you come up with anything different – or better - than the following?

**Command:** Any order given by a commander that is the will of the commander expressed for the purpose of bringing about a particular action.

**Message:** Any thought or idea expressed briefly in a plain or secret language and prepared in a form suitable for transmission by any means of communication.

**Command Message:** A communicated message that supports your commander's intent and the principles of the organization he or she serves. The command message clearly conveys an official position to designated and concerned publics.

**Response = Information + Command Message**

**“Response,” one more time...**

**Command Message + Information = RESPONSE**

**RESPONSE = Information + Command Message**

A command message when combined with information can then be fashioned into a response you can provide to your audiences no matter if they are internal or external audiences.

It is not rocket science, nor brain surgery. It's as easy as  $1 + 1 = 2$ .

## Sample Responses

A soldier is severely injured when his Humvee overturns in Baghdad.

At a news conference, you are asked the following question: "Is the injured soldier going to die?"

How would you respond?

You might say:

1. "I wouldn't care to speculate."
2. "I do not know. I am not a doctor."
3. "Our primary concern is that we are providing him with the best medical care available. We are hopeful that he will recover, and are focused right now on helping his family through this difficult time."

All are responses, of a sort, but not really effective responses. You missed an opportunity to communicate your position.

#3 above, is probably your best bet. #2 is a bit flippant, with no answer and no command message. #1 also doesn't answer the question, much less contain a command message.



## Sample Responses

How would you respond if you were asked: "How much does an F/A-18 cost?"

You might say:

1. \$35,678,611.72
2. About \$36 million
3. The FA-18 costs about \$36 million apiece.

However, I would point out that the F/A-18 is a multi-role fighter, meaning it can defeat other aircraft in a dogfight. It's also an air-to-ground fighter - it can bomb and strafe targets on the ground. When you consider that we use it for a couple different missions, it's an excellent use of tax dollars. We're getting two fighters for the price of one.

Don't add, "Such a deal!"



## Sample Responses

How would you respond if you were asked: "Do you know what caused the crash of this helicopter?"

You might say:

1. "Right now I can't comment on the cause."
2. "No, we really don't know yet."
3. "The cause of the accident is under investigation. Our goal is to find out what happened, learn from it and take whatever steps are necessary to prevent a tragic incident like this from happening again."



## **Wrap Up**

### **What is a definition for a command message?**

Answer: A communicated message that supports your commander's intent and the principles of the organization he or she serves. The command message clearly conveys an official position to designated publics.

### **What are the three main components of a command message?**

Answer: Newsworthy, Understandable, Immediately Actionable

### **What are the three considerations you must keep in mind when you're developing command messages?**

Answer: Know your position intimately, know your publics and consider your barriers.

## Unit Summary



Your success as a Public Affairs Officer depends greatly on your ability to master the development of command messages and communicated responses to your publics that support your commander and the organization you serve. The better you are able to do this for your organization, the more successful you will be.

Command messages are a valuable technique for communicating facts and our underlying position on key issues. Learning to craft effective responses that combine basic facts with key messages will enable you to be a successful Public Affairs Officer.