The MOPC Toolkit: How to avoid the “Polishing Rocks” syndrome

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Even before the invention of Power Point, staff officers and planners wrestled with presenting information in a format that would be accepted at all levels of the “chop chain” while still providing all of the key points necessary to increase the commander’s situational awareness and inform his or her decision making. Depending on where the officer resides in the staff hierarchy, there may be several iterations of Power Point presentations before a decision brief is finally given to the commander. Ideally, each level in the staff hierarchy reviews and makes adjustments deemed necessary while remaining aligned to the commander’s intent, and therefore, changes (if any) should be minimal between presentations. However, more often than not, these refinements have the unintended consequence of changing the very nature of the brief, often taking away from its intent or worse, contradicting the detailed and relevant work that was done during planning.

An unwritten axiom amongst action officers is to start decision briefs with the last smooth product that made it all the way through the chop chain in order to avoid wasting time “polishing” the presentation. Too often unfortunately, that last smooth product has one or more key elements that were removed during the previous review in order to “simplify” the presentation. The result is another axiom; presentations that are only “power point deep.” This problem will continue to compound unless and until a conscious decision is made to reset the decision brief with an approved initial template.

The Navy Planning Process (NPP) includes a number of information and decision briefs that evolve through planner interaction within the OPT and presentation to key leaders. Ultimately these briefs seek to achieve an approved, executable Course of Action (COA) that is understood both within the staff as well as externally by adjacent and subordinate organizations. Per NWP 5-01, the commander must initially approve the mission statement and provides COA development guidance before the planning team begins COA development. COAs must then be accepted by the commander before starting COA analysis (wargaming), and after COA comparison is complete, a decision brief is presented to the commander. Each of these critical briefs have essential elements, developed over time, that build the foundation for follow-on briefs.

while presenting information that is necessary to support the commanders’ decision cycle. When staff officers start with the last smooth product (from a previous operation) that made it all the way through the chop chain, significant risk is introduced and the result is often a product that is missing at least some essential elements.

The fix is to start with templates that are approved by the commander and that include all essential elements of the brief. The Maritime Operational Planners Course (MOPC) toolkit includes templates for all NPP briefs as well as APEX / JOPES formatted directives (WARNORDs, PLANORDs, OPORDs) and reference documents. These templates are generic and can be utilized by all of the Fleet MOCs. They are aligned to doctrine and designed to force communication of critical analysis, direction, guidance, and decisions in support of ongoing and iterative collaborative planning. Key elements of every Navy Planning Process brief and order, as well as notes for applying templates to specific planning problems are available on the SIPRNET at https://extranet.nwc.navy.mil/mopc/default.aspx. The only item you have to add is the command logo (there’s a space for that on the top left corner of each brief). A lot of “rock polishing” can be avoided by simply starting with the right templates from the MOPC toolkit, adding your command logo, getting them blessed by the commander, and then saving the approved templates somewhere easily accessible by all planners on staff.

*The Maritime Operational Planners Course (MOPC) is the United States Navy’s newest program of record aimed at contributing to how the navy out-plans adversaries and adverse situations. The primary annual output of the MOPC is 70 Advance Qualification Designator Joint Planner Maritime (AQD-JPM) graduates. These graduates are a significant investment aimed at building and maintaining fleet planning capability and capacity in response to MHQ/MOC standardization requirements and a growing docket of planning requirements.*