Planning Pathology: How to avoid complicating Specified and Implied Tasks for the Navy Staff Planner
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Pathology: a deviation from a healthy, normal or efficient condition. (Dictionary.com)

Over my career as a planner and as an instructor of planning, I have worked with a lot of different planners from all services and several foreign countries. During that time I have seen a variety of pathologies in planning that can and need to be fixed so that planner can get the most out of their efforts. Initially, I wanted to address Implied Tasks and the pathologies I see with planners and students attempting to wrestle with what constitutes and what does not constitute an implied task. So, this paper will address three pathologies associated with Implied Tasks.

The first pathology is the identification of an actual Implied Task as a Specified task. While developing this discussion, I realized that these pathologies often begin with errors in the identification of Specified Tasks. This pathology then feeds the next two, because planners and students start with a blank list of Implied Tasks after some of their tasks have been misidentified as Specified Tasks. The second pathology also deals with Specified Tasks, specifically the decomposition of Specified Tasks. This pathology has several outcomes which serve to frustrate planners, including the identification of tasks to subordinates as Implied Tasks and the duplication of Specified Tasks. The last pathology we will look at is the identification of potential actions as Implied Tasks. This pathology results in planners identifying activities that may be executed but are not required to be executed as an Implied Task. The result of this pathology is that planners will have lists of task that do not need to be executed and, for certain courses of action, should not be executed. However, since they have been identified as Implied Tasks, they are understood as expected to be executed. The result of these pathologies is that planners and students learning the Navy planning process will generate lists of tasks that do not adequately reflect what their command has been tasked with executing and do not match the expectations of their higher headquarters.

Remember, the purpose of the Mission Analysis step in planning is to understand the operational problem and requirements placed on a given command. These requirements, along with a thorough understanding of the operational problem, form the basis of all future work conducted by planning teams. Errors made by planners at this stage will adversely affect all efforts moving forward, and planners will be forced to expend precious, limited resources to correct them later. The below pathologies work against the purpose of Mission Analysis and serve to frustrate planners and delay planning efforts. Worse, they lead to a misunderstanding of the operational problem and the generation of solutions to the wrong problem.
The first pathology is the identification of an actual Implied Task as a Specified task. To understand this pathology, it is necessary to understand the relationship between specified and implied tasks. Together, specified and implied tasks make up the complete task list for a given command. The task list represents the tasks that a given command must execute in order to meet the requirements of its higher headquarters. By including misidentified Implied Tasks on the list of Specified Tasks, planners create two problems. The first is that they generate a fundamental misunderstanding of the direction from their higher headquarters by inferring meaning. The order (or plan) from higher should explicitly direct the action of subordinates. By inferring tasks and calling them specified, planners have necessarily misunderstood their tasking. The second problem is that planners have inferred tasks (which should be called Implied Tasks) mislabeled them as Specified Tasks, and then begin the 'Identify Implied Tasks’ sub-step of planning having exhausted the multiple avenues for identifying Implied Tasks. This problem leads to the later pathologies as planners search to fill up a page with Implied Tasks.

A Specified Task is defined as “in the context of planning, a task that is specifically assigned to an organization by its higher headquarters.”

Doctrinally, tasks are assigned from a higher headquarters to a subordinate through a written directive. These directives can be of varying forms: plans provide tasks for use in planning efforts; orders provide tasks that are intended to be executed; and FRAGORDs, Daily Intentions Messages, OPTASKs and other formal communications provide changes and/or updates to tasks. In all of the joint and service plans and orders formats, there is a section in the execution paragraph for tasks to subordinates. This is the paragraph that provides most of the specified tasks for a given command. Other places in the order (or plan) that may contain specified tasks are Coordinating Instructions (those tasks that affect two or more units where clarification regarding deconfliction of operations is required), Annexes (tasks specific to the annex, e.g. Sustainment tasks in ANNEX D), or the Higher Headquarters mission statement (although these should also be addressed in the tasks paragraph). Any other tasks derived from the order (or plan) are implied because they are not specified (as all tasks are must be either implied or specified). It is important to limit the search for specified tasks to those areas of the order (or plan) where the higher headquarters has, by convention, told its subordinates they will write specified tasks. The higher headquarters has specifically placed tasks to subordinates in limited sections of their order (or plan) so that their subordinates will unequivocally know the tasks they are expected to execute. Planners need to look for their Specified Tasks only in those sections of the order (or plan) where higher headquarters has specifically placed those tasks.
The second pathology also deals with Specified Tasks; but, in this case, the problem lies with the decomposition of Specified Tasks. Often, especially at C/JFMCC and Fleet levels, the specified tasks from higher headquarters require additional analysis to determine their specific relevance to a given command. This decomposition is important because it better defines what is expected of the command. An operational task may be broad and require some analysis to determine its specific meaning to the command receiving it. Tasks may also encompass a variety of actions that may not all be applicable to the given problem. Therefore, it is important to properly analyze and decompose a specified task during the Mission Analysis step. The pathology associated with this process has two forms: misclassification of decomposed tasks and the translation of specified tasks into tasks to subordinates. This pathology has several outcomes which serve to frustrate planners, including conflating tasks to subordinate commands with Implied Tasks and the duplication of Implied Tasks that are also Specified Tasks.

The DOD Dictionary defines an implied task as: “in the context of planning, a task derived during mission analysis that an organization must perform or prepare to perform to accomplish a specified task or the mission, but which is not stated in the higher headquarters order.” From this definition, it is clear that Implied Tasks are tasks from higher headquarters to the current command that were not specifically stated in an order (or plan). Therefore a restatement of a specified task or component of a specified task is not an implied task; it is a specified task. For example, if tasked to “conduct sea control operations,” then “protect vital sea lanes” is a specified task since it is a component of sea control operations.

Implied Tasks are tasks that the command conducting the mission analysis is responsible for successfully executing. For example, if 5th Fleet were conducting mission analysis, the list of implied tasks should be tasks to 5th Fleet and not to one of its subordinates. The last important component of the definition is that implied tasks are tasks. Therefore, once an implied task is on the list of tasks briefed to the commander, it is treated just like a specified task and must be executed. Implied tasks are not optional, they are self-inflicted wounds.

One potential point of confusion comes from the brief discussion in NWP 5-01 paragraph 2.4.6.2, which is reproduced in its entirety:
“Implied tasks are not specifically stated in the HHQ order but must be performed in order to accomplish specified tasks. Implied tasks emerge from analysis of the order, the commander’s guidance, and after consideration of the adversary’s potential actions. Routine, inherent, or SOP tasks are not included in the list of tasks. One test to determine if an implied task is valid is whether that proposed implied task will require the allocation of resources and must be further tasked to a subordinate unit. If it is a task that should be assigned to a subordinate unit then it should be included on the implied task list.” (NWDC, 2013)

The quoted paragraph only puts forward a partial definition of Implied Task in the discussion, but uses the total definition in the glossary (see above). The omission of the phrase “or a mission” from the paragraph focusses planners on searching for additional tasks that support specified tasks which may lead to the exclusion of those tasks which are necessary to accomplish the overall mission and are not tied to a specified task. Not only is the partial definition misleading, but its converse is also false, i.e. not all specified tasks require implied tasks to support them. Planners, especially student planners, are often misled into thinking that every specified task must have implied tasks associated with it and that all implied tasks must directly support a specified task. This concept is false. Decomposing specified tasks into lists of “implied tasks” that are restatements of the specified task or components of the specified task does not produce implied tasks but produces more detailed specified tasks.

Often, the decomposition actually becomes a translation of tasks from the current echelon to a subordinate one, producing tasks to subordinates, which are neither specified nor implied tasks to the current command. This translation of tasking is critical, especially for a C/JFMCC or Fleet level command that is translating operational to tactical tasks. However, a task to a subordinate is, by definition, a specified task and should be generated in COA Development (or later in the planning process if discovered later). Again, the purpose of the Mission Analysis step is to determine the requirements and expectations placed on a given command under a specific set of conditions, not to identify the actions of that command’s subordinates.

This conflation of specified tasks, implied tasks, components of specified tasks, SOP actions, and tasks to subordinates leads to confusion when attempting to answer one of the fundamental questions of mission analysis “What is a given command expected to do?” It is important to remember that the identification of implied tasks is not done in isolation; rather, it is part of a
process that frames the requirements and responsibilities for a given command. By improperly expanding the definition of an implied task, planners are expanding the scope of the requirements and responsibilities for their command, often beyond the scope of what their higher headquarters requires or what they are resourced to accomplish. They waste precious planning resources brainstorming unnecessary lists of redundant tasks and tasks to other commands and set themselves up to waste precious operational resources executing tasks that are not assigned to their command.

The last pathology deals with expanding the definition of an Implied Task to include options for a specific course of action. The effect of this pathology is similar to the second effect above. Planners begin to identify possible tasks that could be used to solve the operational problem and then identify these potential solutions as part of the operational problem. All military planning processes (and problem-solving models for that matter) separate the identification of the problem from the generation of the solution so that the problem can be properly understood on its own merits. For example, if a command is tasked to “protect vital sea lanes,” then tasks like “escort commercial traffic,” “conduct convoy operations,” or “occupy the sea lane,” are all options for courses of action, but none are implied tasks. As discussed above, the decomposition of a specified task is a specified task and not implied. More importantly, by identifying tasks during mission analysis that are course of action specific, planners have artificially reduced the options available for course of action development. Per the example, once the requirement for the command to “protect vital sea lanes” is identified, the additional potential options are of no value during mission analysis. There is no requirement from higher to “escort commercial vessels.” The task to “protect vital sea lanes” could be met through the conduct of escorts or it could also be met by conducting a show of force, destroying adversary capability, rerouting traffic out of the danger area, or a host of other options or combinations of options depending on the details of the situation. Listing “escort commercial vessels” does not aid planners in understanding their requirements, but is counterproductive to their efforts by adding unnecessary requirements and limiting their options.

As addressed above, implied tasks remain tasks and once the task list is approved, must be executed by the current command. They are not optional. Additionally, implied tasks cannot expand on the higher headquarters mission. Implied tasks, by definition, support the successful completion of the higher headquarters mission set. Any potential implied task that is beyond the scope of assigned tasks or higher headquarters mission cannot be included on the task list. Implied tasks are not a license to create a mission outside a command’s delegated authority.
Commands are resourced to execute their assigned missions and expansions beyond that risk wasting both planning and operational resources against action that the given command was never intended to execute.

The above pathologies applied to Mission Analysis result in several foundational problems for planners attempting to execute planning. Because the understanding of the operational situations, higher headquarters CONOPS, and the given command’s roles and responsibilities within the operational context is the critical fundamental building block to successful planning, any errors at this stage will both persist throughout the planning effort as well as waste precious planning and operational resources. The first foundational problem is a misunderstanding of higher headquarters expectations and requirements for the given command which can lead planners to overlook the critical aspects of their command’s role in an operation by diluting the list of Specified Tasks or to waste resources attempting to execute unnecessary tasks that were erroneously identified. These pathologies are best prevented by following these three steps.

First, planners must ensure the list of specified tasks only draws from the paragraphs in higher headquarters order that tasks subordinates: Tasks to Subordinates paragraph, Coordinating Instructions paragraph, and the Tasks paragraphs of Annexes. By ensuring that implied tasks are not erroneously classified as specified tasks, planners have a correct and complete list of specified tasks to start from. Specified Tasks are meant to be easy to find and identify. When command’s write orders (and commanders sign them), they specifically assign responsibilities to their subordinates. These tasks are necessarily of great value to planners because they represent the requirements from higher that the senior commander thought were important enough to write down and sign their names to. Implied task can also be critical, even essential, but the fact that these were inferred by the staff reading the order is an important distinction that needs to be noted.

Second, planners need to intellectually separate task TO their command from tasks FROM their command. When analyzing Specified and Implied tasks, often planners begin to identify tasks for their subordinates. Although these can be useful later in the planning effort (Course of Action Development), they are not Implied Tasks for their command. The task list for a command includes both Specified and Implied Tasks, but only those that are tasks TO their command. The translation of tasks across echelons is done during Course of Action Development. Mission Analysis is reserved for understanding the requirements placed on the
command doing the analysis. When tasks are conflated across echelons while planners are still trying to grasp the requirements of their echelon, they create an impossible problem for them to navigate. Planners need to ensure that when developing Implied Tasks they use the full definition and focus their thoughts on identifying tasks their higher headquarters should have assigned them (or meant to assign them) but did not.

Third, planners need to continually ensure that their list of Implied Tasks are necessary, appropriate, and do not force the command into a COA prematurely. Implied Tasks help planners understand the requirements placed on their command during a given situation. When planners begin assuming a course of action and identifying tasks associated with a given course of action they have artificially constrained their options while still trying to understand the problem they are handed. By prematurely and erroneously limiting the options available to their command, they create a more complex problem than the one they were handed. Military operations are inherently complex, difficult, and dangerous. There is no reason the make these operations more complex by inadvertently creating a different problem space than the one they were handed by their senior command. Planners should remember that Implied Tasks should be limited in number and planners have to avoid building too long of a list implied tasks. Once an Implied Task is approved by the commander, it is identical to a Specified Task from higher and can only be removed from the task list if the current commander removes it.

These pathologies are not insurmountable, but they do unnecessarily complicate an already intellectually demanding endeavor. Through education, practice, and professionalization of the planning community, these pathologies can be identified early and reduced in scope and effect. If these pathologies become normalized, the value of planning and planners to operational commanders will be reduced, plans will be out of synch across levels of command, and precious resources including lives and material will be wasted due to poor intellectual practices.


2 NWDC. (2013). NWP 5-01. Para 2.4.6.1 ,p2-6

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