

LEAD WITH COMMANDER'S INTENT

Empower your staff by making your objectives clear and giving them room to work.

Everyone knows how important the chain of command is in the military. But during battles, emergencies and other times of duress, it's not always possible to run decisions up and down the chain of command. This is why soldiers are empowered by something called "commander's intent." The military commander gives his leaders a clearly defined goal (the mission) and the forces needed to accomplish that goal, along with a time frame for when the goal must be accomplished. His leaders are then free to execute that goal however they feel is best.

During D-Day in World War II, the American, British and Canadian commanders' intent was to secure key bridges, road junctions and other locations in Normandy that would allow the ground invasion forces to advance inland. The plan was executed, but the air invasion went horribly awry: Only 10 percent of paratroopers landed in their drop zones, troops could not be united into fighting units due to a shortage of radios and difficult terrain, and one of the airborne divisions failed to capture their assigned bridges.

In fact, none of the Allied objectives were achieved on the first day. The situation became chaotic. Fortunately, everyone on the ground knew what their commander's intent was, and they were committed to carrying it out. They improvised, changed plans and, within a week, the primary objective of connecting five bridgeheads was accomplished. At the end of the day, the Allies held a united front more than 60 miles long.

EMPOWERING DEALERSHIP STAFF

In the business world, commander's intent can be used to empower employees. FedEx CEO Fred Smith is a former U.S. Marine Corps officer. His intent is clear: Get every parcel to its destination in a safe, damage-free, cost-effective manner within the shipment period specified by the customer. If a snowstorm prevents planes from taking off

or shuts down a highway, FedEx employees must adapt. They are empowered to reroute drivers, schedule extra planes in another city and adjust schedules. They do not stand around and wait for approvals, or wait to be told what to do. They know "the truck broke down" is not an acceptable excuse. Commander's intent is their primary objective every day.

I have a commander's intent as well. I sit down with every new hire and explain our company's priorities. All of our employees know that, when they are dealing with a customer's problem over the phone or onsite, they are empowered to solve the problem, take care of the customer and do whatever it takes to keep them happy. Whatever their job title, that is their primary objective every day.

Do the employees at your dealership know what their Commander's Intent is? Dealers like to focus on process improvement, but what is the ultimate goal?

Commander's Intent is a concise expression of the purpose of the operation, not an explanation of how the operation should be carried out. I am a big fan and believer in the

benefits of process improvement, but only if the people following it know why they are doing so. Is their ultimate goal to make their manager happy or to make the dealer as much money as possible — neither of which are motivating commander's intents — or to play an integral role in helping your dealership achieve a desired customer retention rate? Do they have a stake in making your store a great place to work and protecting your reputation in the community?

In the military, commander's intent is an important leadership philosophy that encourages all decisions to be devolved to the lowest possible level, so front line soldiers are allowed to exploit opportunities that develop. Empower your employees and give them enough leeway to achieve your objectives, accomplish their goals and keep your customers happy.

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