

Battle Rhythms: Challenges, Considerations, and Recommendations from Warfighter Exercises¹

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Introduction

Time is one, if not the most, precious resource a unit can have in conducting operations. The more time a unit has the more it can train, prepare, plan, and posture for an operation. However, it is rare if ever that a unit or staff complains about having too much time. Further, once operations begin, time seemingly becomes more limited with increased requirements stemming from constant changes on the battlefield. As evidenced in Warfighter Exercises (WFXs), staffs and commanders struggle with a lack of time in a 24-hour period because of daily planning and briefing requirements that overwhelm the battle rhythm. This article seeks to address this problem with the goal of helping units to develop, refine, and implement a sustainable battle rhythm during operations. To do this, the article first highlights the observed battle rhythm challenges and consequences with which units struggle during the exercises. Next, it offers some supplementary considerations in support of doctrine to help units screen and refine their battle rhythm events. Lastly, it provides some additional recommendations to help units enforce and maintain a sustainable battle rhythm.

Battle Rhythm Challenges

Planning an effective, sustainable battle rhythm has proven difficult for many units. During a 10-day WFX, units typically refine and regenerate battle rhythms, sometimes producing as many as 10 or more different versions. Observations from both the Center for Army Lessons Learned (CALL) and the Mission Command Training Program (MCTP) reveal three interrelated factors concerning battle rhythm events that lead to these challenges: quantity, quality, and sequence.

Quantity of Events

Units struggle to determine the proper amount of events within their battle rhythm, having either too many or too few. A CALL observation highlights the challenges with having too many events stating, “The total number of events limited many key staff and planners from conducting their own work. This reduced the ability for planners and commanders to analyze and process information. It also reduced the time available for staff leads to give updates and guidance to their subordinates, who often continued to work with dated information or guidance.”² An MCTP observation reinforces this highlighting, “Congested battle rhythms are one contributing factor to poor planning horizon management, because battle rhythms typically do not preserve the staff’s ability to simultaneously focus on current operations management and future operations shaping.”³ Additionally, having too many events restricts a unit’s flexibility to react to changes on the battlefield, limiting the time available for additional planning sessions and ad hoc meetings.

Units that have too few events also face various issues. One of the most consistent results is a lack of shared knowledge and understanding between various staff sections and command posts. One MCTP observation supports this, highlighting that units that do not include certain events in their battle rhythm “often struggle to develop an early shared understanding . . . resulting in time wasted . . . to gain the required shared understanding across the staff.”⁴ A lack of events also leads to many ad hoc meetings and informal conversations that lack the key details and participation of various planners.⁵ These unplanned meetings often result in a lack of coordination and synchronization of efforts on the battlefield.

Quality of Events

Units also struggle to ensure the quality of battle rhythm events to maximize efficiency and results. Many factors impact the quality of the event. One factor is the medium/format of the event. The following CALL observation points this out:

Many events exceeded their allotted time due to an insistence on using digital briefing tools, which suffered lag time delays and intermittent communication issues that disrupted the flow of the meetings and reduced the clarity of the information presented. Many of these meetings also suffered from a lack of discipline and control with briefers reading slides and presenting general rather than pertinent information for those in the brief.⁶

Further, many units struggle to define/enforce the purpose of the meeting. During one exercise, a “staff reviewed the required inputs and expected outputs for each meeting, identifying several meetings that lacked outputs. These meetings were strictly informational and often unnecessary.”⁷ Another MCTP observation reinforces the importance of quality:

The protection working group was often of limited value to the unit. Without a focused agenda designed to identify and mitigate threats, analyze subordinate unit’s scheme of protection, or generate recommendations to the commander for protection related issues, the protection working group often regurgitated information from other battle-rhythm events. . . Ineffective integration, unproductive meetings, and underutilized tools resulted in lack of unity of effort for the protection cell and a lack of shared understanding across the staff.”⁸

One other key factor is participation. Many battle rhythm events lack quality because of limited participation from key planners, warfighting functions, and other command posts. Many events, “lack the appropriate attendance . . . to feed the unit’s common operational picture (COP), update running estimates of the staff and subordinates, assist with the staff decision-making process for planning efforts, or support the commander in the visualization process.”⁹ This often leads to confusion and a lack of shared understanding, creating a need for other ad hoc meetings or informal discussions. It also often reduces the quality or detail of the meeting inputs, creating gaps in planning.

Sequencing of Events

Sequencing events is the third area that significantly impacts the effectiveness of a unit's battle rhythm. MCTP observations highlight that defining "critical paths" is essential for the proper sequencing of battle rhythm events; however, units often struggle with this. For MCTP, a "critical path consists of several meetings that the staff must conduct (or combine) during their daily operational process battle rhythm that culminates with operations order (OPORD) production."¹⁰ Failing to determine and follow critical paths renders a unit's battle rhythm ineffective in producing the desired outputs in a timely manner. A recent MCTP observation reinforces this: "Units fail to plan future operations at least 96-hours in advance and produce effective orders because they lack an effective critical path of battle rhythm events."¹¹

Another aspect that units struggle to address in the sequencing of events is the time of each event in relation to other events. For one unit, "Many events, designed to inform other events, occurred after the event they were supposed to inform. This led to some meetings receiving dated information from other meetings or planning sessions that occurred between 12 and 20 hours before."¹² In another instance, the time between events was so limited that planners did not have sufficient time to process and analyze the outputs of a previous meeting before attending a subsequent meeting. This limited the overall utility of the information, rendering subsequent outputs less useful as well.¹³

Lastly, units struggle to de-conflict and coordinate internal events. This leads to key planners having many overlapping or simultaneous events, preventing or delaying their attendance in certain events. Compounding this is the limited time that units often fail to leave between events, which prevents planners from disseminating key information to subordinates. In addition to creating conflicting priorities, this also limits information flow and leads to increased stress for planners that may not be able to sustain the pace over an extended time.

Supplementary Considerations and Questions

Doctrine provides a great starting point in battle rhythm development. *ATP 6-0.5 Command Post Organization and Operations* discusses four areas for consideration when developing a battle rhythm: higher headquarters battle rhythm, type of operation, logical arrangement of battle rhythm events, and time available. Further, when reviewing a battle rhythm for approval, it recommends "for the COS or XO to meet with the primary staff to review, discuss, and approve the battle rhythm. This includes a review and approval of meeting instructions (purpose, frequency, participation, agenda, inputs, and outputs) for each meeting on the schedule."¹⁴ With this, it also provides questions to help screen and refine the battle rhythm and the meetings. However, to address the aforementioned challenges, units may find it beneficial to consider some supplemental areas and questions concerning the events/meetings. In conjunction with doctrine, these additional considerations should help units take a more deliberate approach to not only screen its events but also ensure/enforce their purpose.

Event Type

Doctrine poses the two following questions concerning meetings: “Is the meeting necessary?” and “Is there a clear purpose to the meeting?”¹⁵ However, rarely do staff officers propose a meeting that they do not feel is necessary with a purpose. It would likely be beneficial to ask, “What type of event/meeting is it?”

ATP 6-0.5 defines meetings as “gatherings to present and exchange information, solve problems, coordinate action, and or obtain decisions.”¹⁶ With this, *FM 6-0 Commander and Staff Organization and Operations* articulates four types of briefs: information, decision, mission, and staff. From this, units can categorize their events as a brief to present/exchange information; a working group to plan, coordinate, and synchronize; or a board to obtain a decision, answer, or guidance. By identifying the type of event, a unit can screen and refine each event for its intended purpose as well as work to prevent one event from exceeding its intended purpose. This will also lead to a string of follow-on questions for each type of event that will help a unit further screen and refine its battle rhythm events.

Information Brief Considerations

The purpose of a brief is to exchange/present information. From this, there are several questions needing consideration. First, can the “presenter” share the information in a way other than in a meeting? Most information briefs use Microsoft PowerPoint slides or something similar to display the information briefed. Further, many briefs result in briefers reading their slides rather than presenting something different or additional to what is in the slides. If the presenter can provide and even highlight all pertinent information and conclusions on a slide, then why have a meeting to cover the same thing? Next, who needs to know the information and why? The “who” part of this question will prevent unnecessary participation in meetings. The “why” part will help differentiate between “nice to know” and “need to know” information, cutting down on impertinent details and overall time needed for each brief. Lastly, when is the information needed and/or when is the information no longer useful/valid? This will help sequence the events in time with other events as well as determine the needed frequency of the events.

Working Group Considerations

The purpose of a working group is to plan, coordinate, and synchronize actions. To screen these events, one must first ask what action or part of the overall plan the working group will develop. Without an action or plan as an output, the working group is useless and unnecessary. Next, when are these outputs needed, in what format, and from whom? This will help synchronize the working group with subsequent events it may inform and with any other events/actions from which it requires inputs. It will also help identify any subsequent time needed to process and put the plan in the needed format etc. Finally, it will help identify who needs to participate in-person as a planner in the event. Next, what inputs are needed, from whom, and in what format? This will help identify who needs to inform the plan; however, by identifying the format, units can determine whether the person providing the input needs to participate fully, partially, or just provide a product. Lastly, what is the lifespan of the plan/action, and is the plan/action recurring? This will

help determine the frequency of the event and if it needs to be routine or if it can be ad hoc with only a reserved space on the battle rhythm.

Decision Board Considerations

The purpose of a board is to obtain a decision, answer, or guidance. While the format of these boards will depend on the preference and style of the commander, units must still screen these events to preserve time and efficiency in the battle rhythm. First, what output is desired/needed? This will ensure the inputs are properly presented. If a decision is needed, then the inputs need to be organized according to a course of action brief. If an answer or guidance is needed, then the inputs should be presented as questions with any pertinent details to help answer the question/inform the guidance. Units should be wary, as boards often become information briefs, taking additional time and often not leading to a decision due to a commander needing time to process the information. With this, staffs need to work to provide all the information (via brief or other media) sufficiently before the board to ensure the commander has both the needed information and time to reflect prior to the board. Next, who needs to receive the output and when? This will help determine who needs to participate in the meeting to hear the commander and who can wait for the “published” output. Lastly, what is the lifespan of the decision/guidance, and is the need recurring? This, like with the working groups above, will help determine the frequency of the event and if it needs to be routine or if it can be ad hoc with only a reserved space on the battle rhythm.

Additional Recommendations

Along with these supplemental considerations, there are several other recommendations stemming from the WFX that units should consider when they develop their battle rhythms.

1. Combine Events Whenever Possible
 - a. Battle rhythms often become overloaded because of the amount of events staff leads and planners have to conduct both internally and externally, i.e. with other sections, headquarters, or command posts. However, many events feed other events or could happen in conjunction with one another. It would be more efficient to have one combined planning event rather than numerous compartmentalized planning events that still require one additional event to combine the results of the compartmentalized ones. While one larger meeting may take longer, it is likely to preserve more time overall and foster improved integration/synchronization between sections.
2. Appoint Event “Watch Dogs”
 - a. Units struggle as many events exceed their allotted time or are sidetracked because of extraneous questions or other distractions. Having a dedicated person in each meeting who keeps the meeting on its agenda, stops conversations that are either not pertinent or beyond the scope/purpose of the event, and enforces briefing/time standards would help ensure the efficiency and effectiveness of battle rhythm events. This person can reinforce meeting highlights, outputs, and resultant due

outs/requirements. This person can also help identify gaps or redundancies in the event, working to improve the event while maximizing time.

3. Define the “White Space”

- a. Staff sections often leave white space between formal events in their battle rhythm, failing to define what they are doing. This leads to the misconception that white space is “free-time” for ad hoc meetings or additional events. However, this leads to issues as the sections at this time are typically doing other critical things to include planning, generating products, resting/eating, or even analyzing/processing information. As all these efforts are also critical, staff sections need to define this white space in order to protect it.

Conclusion

As WFXs highlight, time is a finite and precious resource for units. The demands a staff must meet in planning, synchronizing, and enabling operations against a peer-level threat on a highly dynamic battlefield, unsurprisingly limits its ability to implement a sustainable, effective battle rhythm. With that, it is vitally important units ruthlessly prioritize their battle rhythm events to get results. In addressing this, doctrine provides a great starting point in battle rhythm development. However, as evidenced by the exercises, units may benefit from additional considerations and screening questions to help address the trending challenges further. While the considerations and recommendations cannot provide any more time in the battle rhythm, they may help preserve a little more of what is available.

¹ Author Note: While this document is unclassified, it cites several unclassified observations within CUI-marked documents, specifically the CALL Warfighter Post Exercise Reports. These reports are only available to authorized CAC card holders who have established an account with the Joint Lessons Learned Information System (JLLIS).

² CALL, WFX 21-4 FORT BLISS POST EXERCISE REPORT, observation 1, <https://www.jllis.mil/apps/index.cfm?do=binders:binder.cdrview&binderid=43462&cdrid=144185> (CAC required).

³ FY20 Mission Command Training in Large Scale Combat Operations Mission Command Training Program Key observations, par. 5, pg. 7, https://usacac.army.mil/sites/default/files/publications/18085_2.pdf.

⁴ FY19 Mission Command Training in Large Scale Combat Operations Mission Command Training Program Key Observations, observation 3.6.9, <https://usacac.army.mil/sites/default/files/publications/20-15.pdf>.

⁵ FY21.1 Mission Command Training in Large Scale Combat Operations Mission Command Training Program Key Observations, observation 2.3 https://usacac.army.mil/sites/default/files/publications/FY21_MCTP.pdf.

⁶ CALL WFX 21-5 Post Exercise Report, observation 1, <https://www.jllis.mil/apps/index.cfm?do=binders:binder.cdrview&binderid=43491&cdrid=144654> (CAC required).

⁷ CALL, WFX 21-4 FORT BLISS POST EXERCISE REPORT, observation 1.

⁸ FY 20 MCTP Bulletin, observation 2.5.1.

⁹ FY 19 MCTP Bulletin, sec. 4.5.

¹⁰ Reeves, Richard MAJ., “News from the CTC: The Sustainment Brigade Staff’s Critical Path,” 20 March 2018, https://usacac.army.mil/organizations/mccoe/call/publication/NFCTC_MAJReeves, pg., 2.

¹¹ FY 19 MCTP Bulletin, sec. 4.4.

¹² CALL WFX 21-2 Post Exercise Report, observation 5, <https://www.jllis.mil/apps/index.cfm?do=binders:binder.cdrview&binderid=42411&cdrid=143003> (CAC required).

¹³ *ibid.*

¹⁴ Headquarters, Department of the Army, *ATP 6-0.5 Command Post Organization and Operations*, 1 March 2017, [https://armypubs.army.mil/epubs/DR_pubs/DR_a/pdf/web/ATP%206-0 5%20\(final\).pdf](https://armypubs.army.mil/epubs/DR_pubs/DR_a/pdf/web/ATP%206-0%205%20(final).pdf), A-4.

¹⁵ *ATP 6-0.5 Command Post Organization and Operations*, A-5.

¹⁶ *ATP 6-0.5 Command Post Organization and Operations*, A-5.