



Building a Unit Planning Standard Operating Procedure (PSOP)

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Foreword

It is difficult to plan operations or events as a staff, especially at the battalion level, when so many of the planners are young and inexperienced. Even the battalion executive officer (XO) and the operations officer (S-3) are likely inexperienced in leading and teaching a staff how to conduct the military decision-making process (MDMP). This inexperience typically leads to a primary planner who plans an operation or event with focus on the movement and maneuver warfighting function (WfF) and modest but unsynchronized inputs from other WfFs. This lack of experience is where an effective planning standard operating procedure (PSOP) can be invaluable in teaching staff how to plan and provide emphasis for specific outputs through each phase of planning. The problem is that a PSOP is often “in the works” for most units as they languish in perpetual development and revision and do not complete it to a meaningful standard. Units will copy and paste excerpts out of doctrine to create an enormous document they publish to subordinate units just before they go to a combat training center, having never validated or practiced the standard operating procedure (SOP) in execution.

If the organization does not have an effective PSOP, it needs to create one to increase organizational success. An effective PSOP provides clear and concise direction to the staff to facilitate planning. It should make an efficient process that minimizes unproductive time across WfFs. This publication will discuss what an effective PSOP should look like and how to build one for an organization.

Characteristics of an Effective Planning Standard Operating Procedure

The most important thing for a PSOP is that your organization can use it. Making it small and transportable goes a long way toward making it a usable product. If it can fit into a planner’s cargo pocket (5 inches by 8 inches) or assault pack, it will be easy for everyone to carry into the field or anywhere planning may occur. This format will also make reproducing easy and affordable since it will not be a 1,000-page document. It must be doctrine based but remain focused on the relevant aspects of “how” the unit will conduct MDMP. Product templates are one of the most critical components of the PSOP, and this publication will dive more into that in subsequent sections.

Ultimately, the unit’s planning guide must be simple to understand so inexperienced staff members can use it with minimal coaching. The battalion-level staffs are often young and inexperienced in planning and require massive amounts of coaching from the XO and S-3. This inexperience is not their fault, they just lack experience or formal education. Units typically have lieutenants filling positions as staff primaries, and even the junior captains have limited experience planning as a staff member. Combine this with trying to learn from the commander and how to receive information, and there is the potential for a disconnection between the commander and the staff. This disconnection will translate into an anemic operation order(s) (OPORDs) and fighting products. The products must work for the commander and be executable by the staff.

A unit may have a PSOP that works. When the commander changes command, take the opportunity to ask the commander about his/her thoughts on the PSOP. Sometimes a commander is more adaptable and can fall in on a set product. Still, new commanders will often want an updated or new SOP to align with their preferred method of receiving and transmitting information.

How to Build a Planning Standard Operating Procedure

Once a unit decides that there is a need for a new PSOP, the unit needs to understand where its starting point is. Does the unit have a functional SOP that needs an update? Is the unit starting from scratch and building a new SOP? The first thing the unit needs to do is receive the commander's initial planning guidance. This guidance will help the unit understand what the PSOP will look like, and the essential elements and characteristics that need to be in it. The unit will also determine the number of action officers to assign or if this will be a full-blown staff MDMP session.

The next step is establishing a timeline. The XO or S-3 can develop an MDMP timeline or a "plan-to-plan," depending on how the unit decided to build the SOP. This timeline is one of the most critical steps that units often overlook. Units will tend to establish a vague timeline that spans several months but will not have hard times for in-progress reviews. If the commander does not review the progress formally to provide feedback, then the PSOP has less chance of coming to completion and being a quality product that the commander will endorse and enforce. If there are several points to review progress, it helps to hold people accountable for continuing the project and not letting it fall behind. Also, provide dedicated time to receive updated guidance from the commander. A shorter and focused timeline will give the organization the best chance for success if the unit does not rush (like waiting until the month before a combat training center [CTC] rotation).

In the initial planning guidance, the battalion commander should identify whether to update the current PSOP or build a new one. Updating an old PSOP provides the staff with some consistency. At the same time, it allows the unit to reflect updates in Army doctrine and align the process with the commander's leadership style. If the unit is going to discard the old PSOP or the unit never had one to begin with, then a great place to start is the Operations Group MilSuite page at <https://www.milsuite.mil/book/groups/ntc-operations-group>. Units can find examples that may align with the commander's intent. These examples will save a lot of time concerning content and formatting. It may also help spark some ideas that will determine what the unit's new PSOP will (or will not) look like. However, one pitfall to this approach is that inexperienced staff members may accept the document at face value and fail to examine it for correctness. Staff members, needing more office software experience, may also need help dealing with document formatting.

Remember the characteristics of an effective PSOP and how the commander prioritizes these characteristics. Units should use this criterion to consistently evaluate the progress and keep the staff from going outside the commander's intent, like the evaluation criteria during MDMP. The staff will need to validate the product as it nears completion. Conducting MDMP with the product just created will help identify gaps and adjust pieces before the final stamp of approval. Optimally, this validation could occur by the S-3 or XO aligning a tactical exercise without troops (TEWT) or another exercise. In that case, the S-3 or XO could achieve multiple training objectives simultaneously, making the most efficient use of valuable time.

What Should be in a Planning Standard Operating Procedure

Compiling information is where a well-intentioned planner can go off the trail by adding every informative piece of doctrine they find. Conversely, this daunting task can paralyze some action officers, who may need help knowing where to begin. The following is a concise list of the critical elements required to help the staff understand how the unit will execute MDMP.

- Duties and responsibilities
- Who is expected to participate
- Room set-up
- Clear inputs and outputs
- References list
- Practical formats executable in field/combat environments
- Clearly defined essential fighting products with blank templates and examples
- Standardized products and briefs
- Packing lists
- Tools required for each phase and staff member responsible for specific tools

The duties and responsibilities of staff officers are important. A staff officer may think they understand the expectations based on doctrinal responsibilities in MDMP; however, take the unit process into account. Identifying the inputs and outputs of each planning is important, particularly if multiple people from a particular WfF are involved in the planning. Additionally, some planners may need to cover down on another WfF output depending on the organization. Specificity does matter and the more detail that the PSOP can provide an individual on their requirements, the better prepared they will be.

Understanding who is expected to participate can seem obvious at first. However, this clarity quickly disappears in a field environment. This is because of the requirement of running current operations simultaneously with future operations (plans), overlaid with distributed command and control nodes, 24-hour operations, and security. The realities of combat often result in units having a single planner for a complex operation. It is also common for multiple staff officers to plan their specific WfFs in a vacuum, completely desynchronized with each other and current operations.

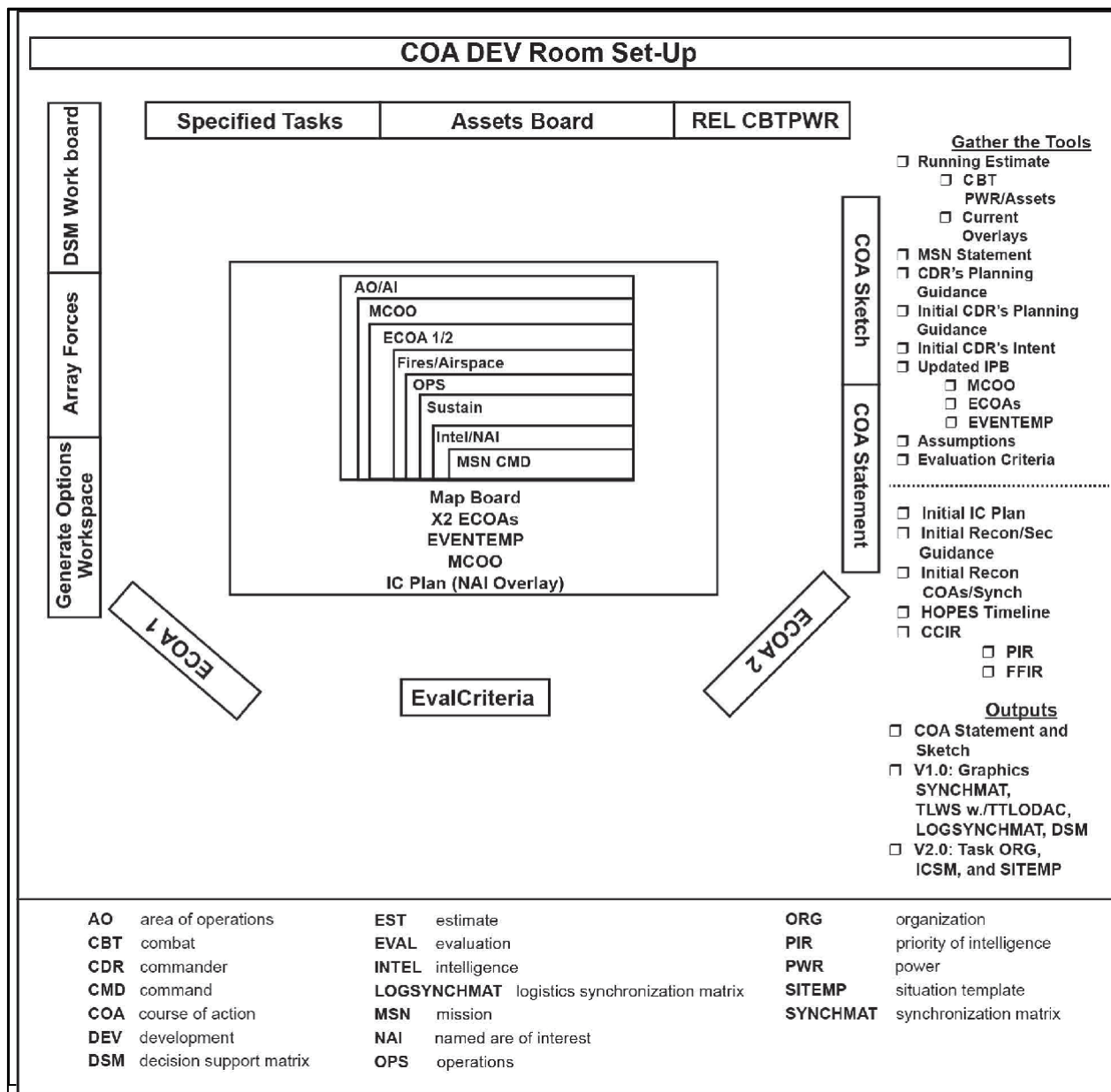


Figure1. Course of Action Development Room Layout Example

Having a specific place to bring planners together and understand what the room layout will look like is also important. Figure 1 is an example of a room layout for a course of action (COA) development. The setup will ensure the planners know the room display and what to bring. Selecting a room layout that increases shared understanding and synchronization across the WfFs is critical. It should also fit into the available space in a functional way.

Identifying clear and specific outputs for each phase of the MDMP will help inexperienced staff officers focus on planning and creating efficiencies in the process. Field Manual (FM) 5-0, *Planning and Orders Production*, 16 May 2022, outlines the outputs for each phase in broad terms only. However, it does not tell the S-4 to provide the location, task, purpose, trigger, and orientation of the sustainment nodes to the S-3 for inclusion in the COA statement. It also does not

tell the S-3 to produce a version 1 of the synchronization matrix (SYNCMAT) during COA development. This level of specificity gives the planners purpose and direction, especially in a time-constrained environment. Specificity will also help the S-3 and XO keep the staff honest and hold them accountable for their products.

Including the formats for the required products and briefs is also critical to helping the staff remain focused and efficient. If they are recreating products with every iteration, it becomes a huge waste of time, and the commander must learn new formats every time the staff briefs. The formats should be practical and produced quickly in an austere environment. At this point in the development of the PSOP, the commander's identification of the needed essential fighting products for each operation should be complete.

A packing list might seem trite, but it will save a lot of stress and heartache. There is nothing worse for the staff than to be in the middle of MDMP and realize they forgot paper and cannot print fighting products for distribution to leaders across the organization. Moreover, it provides a checklist for noncommissioned officers (NCOs) and officers to verify before deployments and facilitates supply ordering, and load planning. These types of oversights are more difficult to solve once personnel disperse geographically based on battlefield geometry.

How to Implement a Planning Standard Operating Procedure

Once the SOP is complete and the commander approves it, it is still not ready to go to a CTC. The staff will still need to validate the SOP, train on it, and make it part of how to conduct business. This validation is more challenging than it sounds and requires staff and unit leadership discipline. Print hard copies that are compact enough to be mobile, but still usable, for each staff member. Do not rely on "soft copies" on the computer or SharePoint. Computers are great, but they are usually a limited resource. Even in a garrison setting, there may be limited connectivity, and staff members will try to return to their office or personal workstation, which is full of distractions.

A printed PSOP is easy to issue to new staff members during the on-boarding process and makes it convenient for them to reference. On-boarding should also include a guided review of the SOP to make sure people understand what is in it, how to use it, and what expectations exist. Consistency and discipline to adhere to the prescribed process is incredibly important. Officers and NCOs will only learn their roles and be efficient in execution if leaders hold them accountable to the standard. The XO should inspect the staff for the PSOP at the beginning of every iteration of MDMP and have extras on hand for those who do not have their PSOP available. Personnel will lose them or transfer them without returning them. And like anything that is small and made of paper, austere environments will also destroy them as well.

Finally, look for opportunities to conduct MDMP and staff planning. Use the PSOP as much as possible to make it part of the culture of the staff and to solidify it as a known quantity of how your unit plans. When possible, use the formats and templates in the PSOP to facilitate routine reporting in the garrison environment. The more ingrained it is in the organization's culture, the more likely it is to persevere through the leader transitions. Leaders who fall in on good systems that are effective and efficient are likely to keep them in place, and the staff will undoubtedly perform at a higher level when leadership provides them with consistency of expectations.

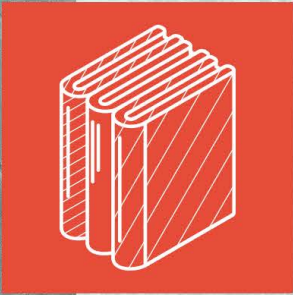
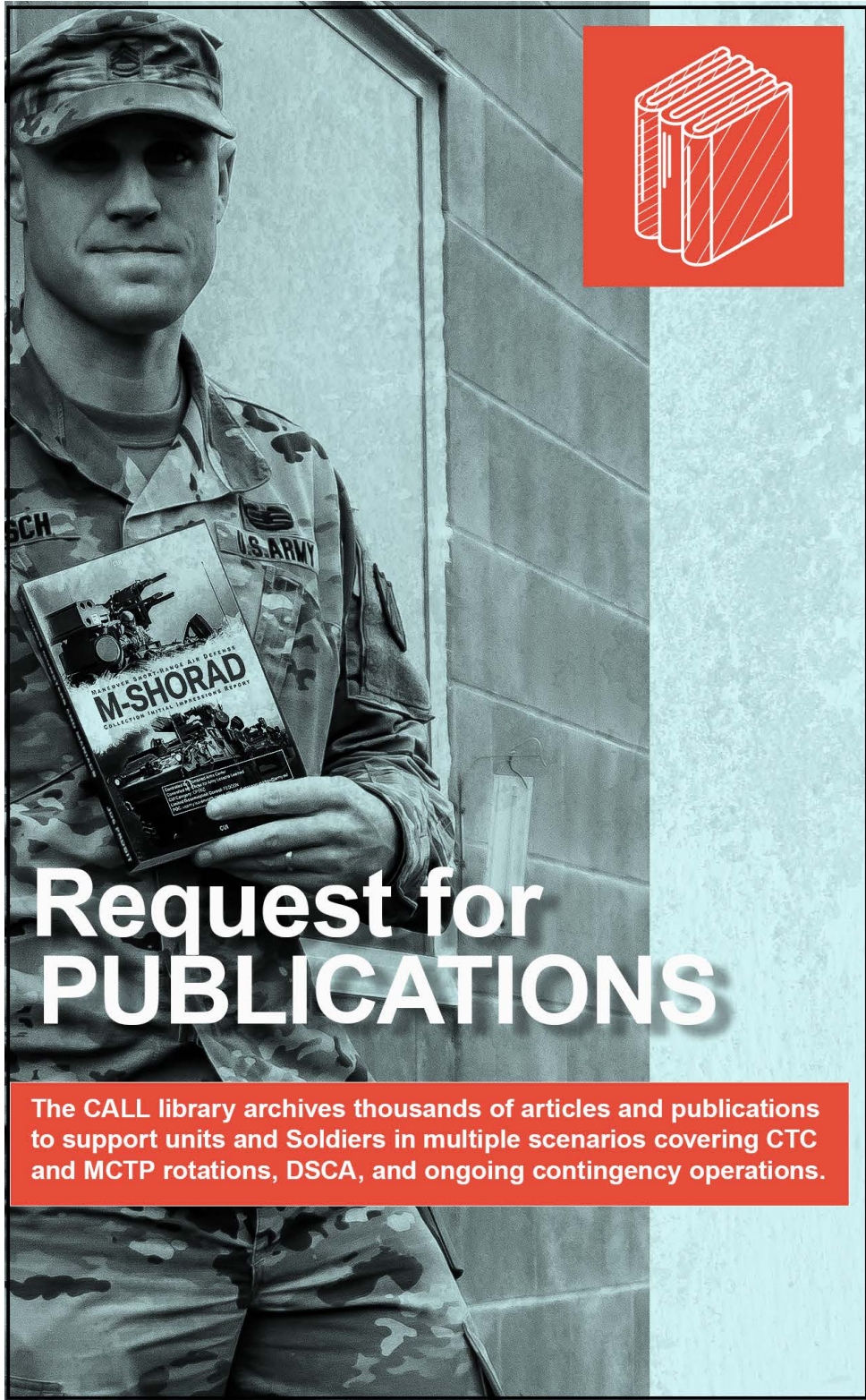
Conclusion

The PSOP is the most critical tool that will enable a junior staff to be effective and efficient with the planning process. This single product will allow the battalion commander to train the staff while enforcing a detailed set of standards. Staffs can better stand up to the rigors of combat and other

demanding training environments if they have put in the time to develop planning processes and train on those processes.

Terms

CALL	Center for Army Lessons Learned
COA	course of action
CTC	combat training center
FM	field manual
MDMP	military decision-making process
OPORD	operations order
PSOP	planning standard operating procedure
SOP	standard operating procedure
SYNCMAT	synchronization matrix
TEWT	tactical exercise without troops
XO	executive officer



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