

FROM ORDERS TO UNDERSTANDING: DEVELOPING COMMUNICATION CAPABILITY FOR ADAPTIVE LEADERSHIP AMONG MILITARY CADETS IN BANI ENVIRONMENTS

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Abstract: *The increasing prevalence of BANI (brittle, anxious, nonlinear and incomprehensible) environments challenges traditional military leadership models, requiring approaches that emphasize understanding, adaptability and decentralized action. In this context, communication evolves from a simple transmission of orders into a core leadership capability that enables alignment, coherence and shared understanding. This paper examines the role of leader communication in enhancing understanding among military cadets and its relevance for adaptive leadership within mission command frameworks. The study adopts a qualitative-conceptual approach supported by an exploratory questionnaire administered to cadets of the Land Forces Academy. The findings indicate that communication focused on context and commander’s intent significantly enhances task comprehension, coordination and team coherence. At the same time, the results reveal a gap between understanding intent and the ability to act independently based on it. Building on these insights, the paper proposes a communication-centered training model structured around context, intent, understanding and shared understanding. This perspective supports the development of adaptive leadership competencies and highlights communication as a fundamental capability for effective action in complex operational environments.*

Keywords: communication, mission command, adaptive leadership, shared understanding, operational environment

1. Introduction

The contemporary operational environment is increasingly characterized by complexity, uncertainty and rapid change, often described through the concept of BANI: Brittle, Anxious, Nonlinear and Incomprehensible [1]. In such conditions, military leaders operate in contexts where situations evolve unpredictably, and where understanding the operational environment becomes essential for coherent action. Traditional assumptions regarding stability, linear planning and clear cause-effect relationships are progressively challenged. Military doctrine has already acknowledged this shift. The concept of mission command, reflected in doctrinal documents developed

by NATO and the U.S. Army, emphasizes the importance of shared understanding and the communication of commander’s intent as key elements for decentralized and adaptive action [2]. In this framework, effective leadership is not limited to issuing clear orders, but also involves ensuring that subordinates understand the purpose, context and desired effects of their actions. However, in military training environments, communication often remains predominantly focused on the transmission of instructions. While this approach supports discipline and coordination, it may prove insufficient in situations marked by ambiguity, time pressure and changing conditions. When subordinates do not

understand the broader context or the intent behind an order, their ability to adapt, take initiative and act coherently may be reduced. From this perspective, communication should be understood not only as a means of transmitting information, but as a leadership capability through which meaning, direction and alignment are created. The literature on adaptive leadership and sensemaking highlights the role of leaders in helping individuals interpret complex situations and coordinate their actions accordingly [3]. For military cadets, developing this capability is particularly important, as future officers must learn not only to command, but also to make their soldiers understand, trust and follow a clear direction.

Starting from these considerations, this paper examines how military leaders' communication can foster understanding and support adaptive action among subordinates operating in BANI-type environments? This paper aims to analyze how communication contributes to this process and to propose a perspective applicable to the training of military cadets, emphasizing the need to develop communication as a fundamental component of adaptive leadership.

2. Theoretical Framework

The present study is grounded in several interrelated concepts that are essential for understanding leadership in contemporary military environments, namely communication, mission command, sensemaking and adaptive leadership. Within military organizations, communication should not be reduced to the transmission of orders, but rather understood as the process through which leaders convey information, intent and meaning in order to ensure coherence of action. According to U.S. Army doctrine, leadership involves influencing people by providing purpose, direction and motivation to accomplish the mission [5]. In this acceptance, communication represents the primary

mechanism through which this influence is exercised.

The concept of mission command is central to modern military leadership. It refers to the use of command and control through mission-type orders, allowing subordinates to exercise disciplined initiative while remaining aligned with the commander's intent.[6] This approach has developed in response to increasingly complex and unpredictable operational environments, in which centralized control and highly detailed instructions often prove inadequate. Mission command is based on several principles, including competence, mutual trust, shared understanding, disciplined initiative, and acceptance of risk [2, 6]. Among these, communication plays a decisive role, as it ensures that subordinates understand the purpose of their actions and are able to act independently while remaining aligned with the overall objective. Commander's intent complements this concept by defining why the operation is conducted and what final conditions it seeks to achieve. As emphasized in doctrine, commander's intent enables subordinates to adapt their actions when conditions change, ensuring continuity and coherence even in the absence of direct supervision [6, 7]. This is particularly relevant in dynamic environments, where leaders cannot anticipate every possible development and must rely on subordinate initiative.

Mission command can function effectively only when those involved build a common understanding of the situation, objectives, and intent. NATO doctrine highlights that understanding the operational environment and maintaining coherence across all levels of command are essential for successful operations [2]. Shared understanding refers to a common perception of the situation, objectives and constraints among members of a unit. Without it, decentralized execution may become fragmented and ineffective. Research in military leadership further emphasizes that shared understanding enhances coordination, reduces ambiguity

and supports more effective decision-making in complex environments [8].

The importance of understanding in such contexts is also supported by the concept of sensemaking. According to Weick, sensemaking represents the process through which individuals interpret ambiguous situations and transform uncertainty into actionable understanding [9]. In military operations, where information is often incomplete and situations evolve rapidly, sensemaking becomes a critical factor for effective action. Leaders play a central role in this process by framing the situation, clarifying priorities and guiding how subordinates interpret events. Through communication, they influence not only what subordinates do, but also how they understand the context in which they act.

This perspective is reinforced by contemporary approaches to leadership in complex environments. Adaptive leadership emphasizes the need for leaders to mobilize people to deal with uncertainty, adjust their behavior and respond effectively to changing conditions [3]. In such contexts, leadership is less about providing predefined solutions and more about facilitating understanding and enabling adaptation. Similarly, the Cynefin framework developed by Snowden and Boone highlights that in complex domains, cause-effect relationships cannot be determined in advance, and leaders must encourage interpretation, experimentation and flexible responses rather than impose rigid plans [4]. The relevance of these perspectives is further emphasized by the characteristics of BANI environments, which are described as brittle, anxious, nonlinear and incomprehensible [1]. In such conditions, leaders are confronted with situations that are difficult to predict and even more difficult to interpret. As a result, clear communication and the ability to create shared meaning become essential for preserving coherence and direction. A leader who relies exclusively on orders may obtain compliance, but not necessarily

understanding or initiative. In contrast, a leader who communicates intent, context and purpose can support alignment, trust and adaptive action.

Studies in military leadership confirm the importance of communication in enabling effective mission command. Wong and Gerras argue that empowering subordinates through understanding and intent is essential for success in complex environments, where rapid decision-making and initiative are required [10]. Similarly, Shamir highlights that modern command systems increasingly rely on trust and understanding rather than direct control, reinforcing the central role of communication in leadership practice [8].

From an educational perspective, these theoretical insights have direct implications for the training of military cadets. If effective action depends on understanding, interpretation and adaptability, then communication must be treated as a core leadership capability. Training should not focus exclusively on the formulation and execution of orders, but also on the development of the ability to communicate intent, clarify context and ensure shared understanding. Recent studies on military education emphasize that developing such competencies at an early stage significantly enhances the ability of future officers to operate in complex and unpredictable environments [11].

Therefore, communication should be understood not as a supporting function, but as a fundamental component of mission command and adaptive leadership. It is through communication that leaders create understanding, align actions and enable subordinates to act effectively in dynamic operational environments.

3. Methodology

The present study adopts a qualitative-conceptual approach supported by an exploratory questionnaire-based investigation conducted among military cadets. The purpose of this methodological approach is to support the main objective of

the study namely to examine the role of communication as a leadership capability and to propose a perspective applicable to the training of military cadets.

The research is structured around the following objectives:

- **RObj1:** to identify the role of communication in facilitating understanding during military training activities;
- **RObj2:** to analyze how communication of commander's intent contributes to task comprehension;
- **RObj3:** to examine how communication supports shared understanding within cadet groups;
- **RObj4:** to highlight the importance of communication as a component of leadership development in military education.

Based on these objectives, the main research hypothesis is formulated as follows:

- **RH:** Communication focused on intent and understanding contributes significantly to the development of shared understanding among cadets during training activities.

To support the validation of this hypothesis, the following research questions are proposed:

- **RQ1:** What role does communication play in facilitating understanding among cadets?
- **RQ2:** How does the communication of commander's intent influence task comprehension?
- **RQ3:** To what extent does communication contribute to shared understanding within the group?

In order to answer these questions, a structured questionnaire was developed and administered to a sample of 53 military cadets within the Land Forces Academy. Participation was voluntary and anonymous, and respondents were instructed to answer based on their experience during training activities and practical exercises. The sample size allows identifying consistent trends in perceptions, although the study

remains exploratory and does not aim at statistical generalization.

The questionnaire includes 15 closed-ended items, each rated on a five-point Likert scale from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree". The questionnaire is organized across four dimensions, aligned with the theoretical framework of the study: communication and understanding, communication and commander's intent, communication and shared understanding, and communication and leadership development. The items were designed to capture perceptions regarding clarity of communication, understanding of intent, decision-making, coordination, and leadership effectiveness.

The data collected were analyzed through descriptive statistical methods, with particular emphasis on mean values for each item and dimension, to identify patterns in cadets' perceptions. The analysis aims to highlight patterns related to the role of communication in supporting understanding and coherence within the group, rather than to provide statistical generalization.

The study has several limitations:

- Since the data were obtained through self-reporting, they may reflect respondents' subjective interpretations
- The analysis is limited to descriptive statistics, without inferential testing
- The sample is drawn from a single institution, which may limit external validity

Despite these limitations, the study provides relevant empirical support for the role of communication in military training and contributes to the development of a conceptual model for adaptive leadership.

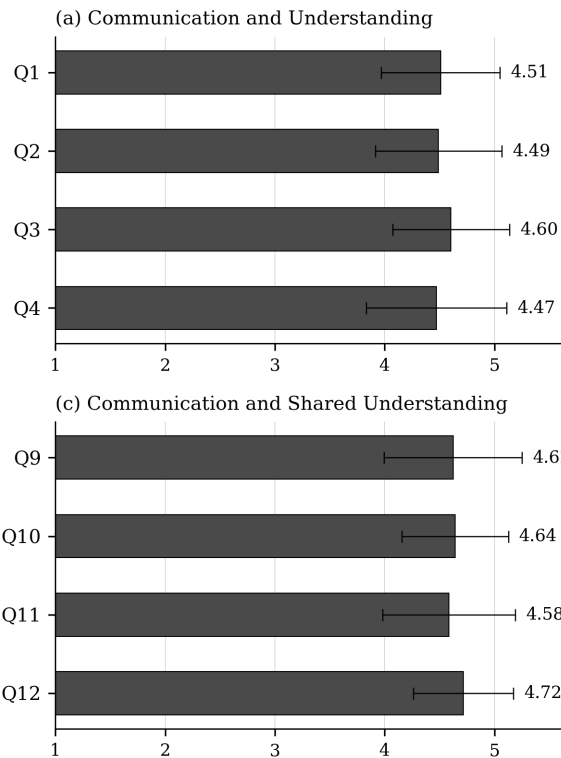
4. Results and Discussion

The analysis of the questionnaire responses was carried out according to the research objectives and research questions formulated in the methodology. The results are interpreted using descriptive statistics, focusing on mean values in order to identify general trends in cadets' perceptions

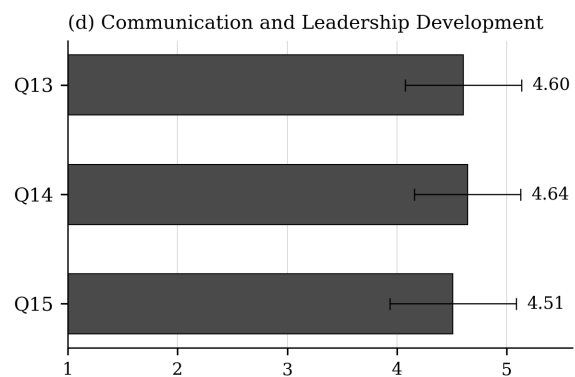
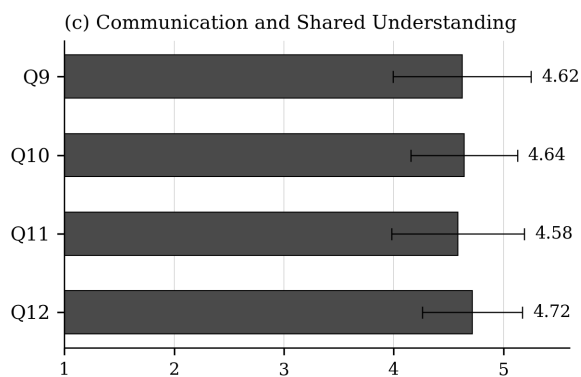
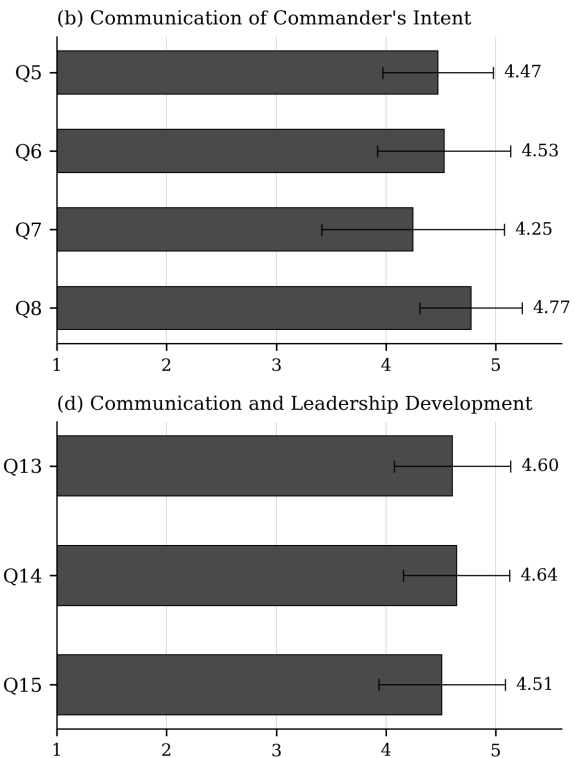
regarding the role of communication in military training environments.

4.1. Communication and Understanding (RObj1 / RQ1)

The results indicate a consistently high level of agreement regarding the role of



communication in facilitating understanding. Items related to clarity of instructions, explanation of tasks and communication of expectations recorded mean values in the range of 4.47–4.60 (see Figure 1, panel a).



Mean score on 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree); error bars = ± 1 SD

Figure 1. Mean scores (± 1 SD) for the 15 questionnaire items, grouped by dimension: (a) Communication and Understanding (RObj1 / RQ1); (b) Communication of Commander's Intent (RObj2 / RQ2); (c) Communication and Shared Understanding (RObj3 / RQ3); (d) Communication and Leadership Development (RObj4). $N = 53$. Item wording is reported in Table 1.

These findings suggest that cadets perceive communication as a critical factor in transforming instructions into meaningful and actionable tasks. Clear communication contributes not only to comprehension, but also to reducing ambiguity and increasing confidence in task execution. This supports the theoretical perspective that understanding represents a prerequisite for effective action in complex operational environments.

4.2. Communication of Commander's Intent (RObj2 / RQ2)

The results related to the communication of commander's intent show slightly lower, yet still strong, levels of agreement, with mean

values between 4.25 and 4.77 (see Figure 1, panel b).

Cadets recognize that understanding the intent behind a task improves their ability to interpret the purpose of the mission and supports decision-making during training activities. However, the item referring to the ability to act independently without detailed instructions recorded the lowest mean score (4.25), indicating greater variability in responses.

This finding highlights an important nuance: while cadets understand the concept of commander's intent, its practical application as a basis for autonomous action is not fully developed. This gap between understanding

intent and acting independently represents a critical challenge for the implementation of mission command in training environments.

4.3. Communication and Shared Understanding (RObj3 / RQ3)

The highest levels of agreement were recorded for items related to shared understanding and group coordination, with mean values ranging between 4.58 and 4.72 (see Figure 1, panel c).

Cadets strongly perceive that clear and coherent communication contributes to the development of a common understanding within the group, facilitating alignment of actions and improving coordination during training activities. These results confirm the doctrinal emphasis on shared understanding as a fundamental condition for effective mission command.

Moreover, the high scores related to teamwork and coordination suggest that communication is important not only for individual performance but also for collective functioning, as it supports coherence and synchronization within the unit.

4.4. Communication and Leadership Development (RObj4)

The results also highlight a strong consensus regarding the importance of communication as a leadership capability. Items related to trust, clarity, and leadership effectiveness recorded mean values between 4.51 and 4.64 (see Figure 1, panel d), indicating that cadets perceive communication as a fundamental component of effective leadership.

This finding reinforces the theoretical perspective that leadership in complex environments is not limited to issuing orders, but involves creating meaning, aligning actions and enabling understanding.

Overall, the results provide strong support for the research hypothesis (RH), which stated that communication focused on intent and understanding contributes to the development of shared understanding among cadets.

At the same time, the findings reveal a critical insight: although communication

effectively supports understanding and coordination, there remains a gap in translating this understanding into autonomous action. This suggests that current training practices may emphasize comprehension, but do not sufficiently develop the ability to act independently based on commander's intent.

4.5. Discussion in Relation to Theory

The findings are consistent with and reinforce the conceptual foundation guiding the study. The strong emphasis on understanding and shared understanding aligns with the principles of mission command and supports the argument that communication is essential for decentralized execution.

At the same time, the identified gap between understanding and action reflects challenges highlighted in the literature on adaptive leadership and sensemaking. While leaders can facilitate interpretation and alignment through communication, the development of autonomous action requires additional training focused on decision-making, initiative and risk acceptance.

From this perspective, communication emerges not only as a tool for transmitting information, but as a mechanism for enabling sensemaking, building trust and supporting adaptive behavior in complex environments.

4.6. Implications for Training

The results suggest that military training programs should place greater emphasis on:

- linking the communication of intent to practical decision-making exercises
- encouraging initiative and independent action in controlled training scenarios
- integrating communication as a core leadership competency, not only as a support function

Such an approach would support the transition from understanding to action, which represents a key requirement for effective mission command in BANI environments.

5. Proposed Perspective for Cadet Training

Drawing on both the theoretical analysis and the findings of the questionnaire, the study proposes a communication-oriented perspective for cadet leadership training. Communication should be treated not as a secondary skill, but as a core component of mission command and adaptive leadership. The proposed model is structured around four elements: **Context, Intent, Understanding and Shared Understanding(CIUS)**.

First, the leader provides context, explaining the situation and the relevant factors that influence the task. Second, the leader articulates the intent by explaining the purpose of the action and the desired end state. Third, the leader verifies understanding, ensuring that subordinates correctly interpret both the task and the intent. Finally, this process supports shared understanding, allowing the group to coordinate its actions coherently. Unlike traditional communication approaches focused on order transmission, the CIUS model explicitly integrates understanding verification and collective alignment as core steps in the leadership process. This model can be applied during briefings, tactical exercises and leadership training activities. Cadets should be trained not only to issue orders, but also to explain intent, clarify context and check understanding. In this way, communication

becomes a practical tool for developing leaders capable of creating clarity, alignment and coherence in complex environments.

6. Conclusions

The study analyzed the role of leader communication in military training and its contribution to understanding, commander's intent and shared understanding. The findings support the hypothesis that communication focused on intent and understanding helps cadets better interpret tasks and coordinate their actions. The results show that cadets value clear communication, especially when it explains the purpose of a task and supports a common understanding within the group. However, the findings also suggest that using commander's intent as a basis for independent action remains an area that needs further development. Therefore, the proposed perspective — based on context, intent, understanding and shared understanding — offers a simple and applicable approach for cadet leadership training. It supports the practical implementation of mission command and highlights communication as a fundamental component of adaptive leadership.

In conclusion, the study highlights that the key challenge in military leadership training is no longer the transmission of orders, but the transformation of understanding into autonomous and coherent action in complex operational environments.

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Table 1. Questionnaire items grouped by dimension (5-point Likert scale: 1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree).

Item	Dimension	Item wording
Q1	Understanding	Clear communication from a leader helps me understand the purpose of a task.
Q2	Understanding	When a leader explains the intent behind an order, I better understand what is expected of me.
Q3	Understanding	Understanding the context of a situation improves my performance during training.
Q4	Understanding	It is easier for me to act when I understand why a task must be accomplished.
Q5	Commander's Intent	When the leader communicates the commander's intent, I better understand the purpose of the mission.
Q6	Commander's Intent	Knowing the intended outcome of a task helps me make decisions during training.
Q7	Commander's Intent	Communication of intent helps me act even when I do not receive detailed instructions.
Q8	Commander's Intent	I consider that explaining the purpose of an order is more useful than only giving instructions.
Q9	Shared Understanding	Clear communication contributes to a common understanding within the group.
Q10	Shared Understanding	When all members understand the intent, teamwork becomes more effective.
Q11	Shared Understanding	Lack of communication can lead to different interpretations of the same task.
Q12	Shared Understanding	Shared understanding improves coordination during training activities.
Q13	Leadership Development	Communication skills are essential for future military leaders.
Q14	Leadership Development	A leader who communicates clearly gains more trust from subordinates.
Q15	Leadership Development	Communication should be more strongly emphasized in military training.