Preface

This paper shares insights and best practices on the role of assessment at Combatant Command and JTF headquarters. Commanders and staffs recognize they cannot precisely model the behavior of the complex environment nor predict results, but rather need some means to deepen their understanding of the operational environment (OE), assess how they are doing, and whether and how to adjust their plan. They all note the need to balance quantitative and qualitative assessment indicators and analysis to deepen their understanding and look ahead. Effective assessments can effectively drive both design and planning, and assist commanders in prioritizing / allocating resources.

The Joint Warfighting Center’s (JWFC) Joint Training Branch (JTB) is afforded the unique opportunity to visit and support commanders and staffs of joint headquarters worldwide as they prepare for, plan, and conduct operations. We gain insights into their challenges and solutions as they support our national interests. We analyze and compare practices among the different headquarters, reflect on the various challenges, techniques and procedures, and draw out and refine what we term “best practices,” which inform and shape joint doctrine.

We have developed a broader Joint Operations Insights and Best Practice paper and several focus papers on pertinent topics. These documents (including this paper) can be found at: https://jko.harmonieweb.org/coi/JointTrainingDivision/Pages/default.aspx.

We want to get your thoughts on this subject area. Please pass on your comments, insights, and best practices so that we can share them throughout the community. The JTB’s POC for insights and best practices is Mike Findlay at (757) 203-5939, E-mail michael.findlay.ctr@jfcom.mil.

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1. Executive Summary

Assessment is ultimately the commander’s responsibility. The commander develops his own assessment, in part through staff input and their assessments, but possibly even more so through battlefield circulation and discussion with commanders and stakeholders. Assessment drives design and planning. It helps:

- Deepen understanding of the operational environment.
- Depict progress toward accomplishing the mission.
- Inform commander’s intent, guidance for design and planning, prioritization, and execution.

Assessment helps answer the questions “what happened,” “why and so what,” and “what do we need to do” (see figure) across three areas:

- **Task** assessment focused on “are we doing things right” by assessing performance of our tasks. Task assessment, much like AARs and hot washes, helps review and improve our techniques and procedures in how we perform our tasks.
- **Operational environment (OE)** assessment focused on “are we doing the right things” by assessing how we’re changing the OE, for better or worse. OE assessment, probably the one in which most effort is expended, assesses how the OE is changing, and allows us to gauge if we’re doing the right things to change the environment. It directly influences prioritization, amending the current plan if off course, and future planning.
- **Campaign** assessment focused on “are we accomplishing the mission” by assessing progress in achieving our objectives. Campaign assessments occur at higher commands. They focus on whether the operation is on plan in terms of timelines or success criteria and make recommendations for changes to address shortfalls or new challenges.

Assessment processes and organizational constructs are continuing to evolve. Insights:

- Assessment includes monitoring of relevant information, evaluation to judge progress and determining “why” the current degree of progress exists, and actions for improvement.
- Plan for assessment, including determination of MOPs and MOEs and how to assess.
- Incorporate both quantitative (observation-based) and qualitative (opinion-based) information indicators. Human judgment is integral to assessment and often key to success. Balance a reliance on human judgment (qualitative) with direct observation and mathematical rigor (quantitative) to reduce the likelihood of skewed conclusions and decisions.
- Involve interagency and other stakeholders. Their perspectives can enrich your assessment.
- Avoid committing valuable time and energy to excessive and time-consuming assessment schemes and quantitative collection efforts that may squander valuable resources.
- Use caution in establishing cause and effect (the why). Beware of drawing erroneous conclusions particularly in the case of human behavior, attitudes, and perception. Address confidence of the assessment conclusions and risk in implementation of recommendations.
- Assess task performance through daily staff updates and battlefield circulation. Assess the OE through periodic OE assessment venues at operational-level HQ. Assess campaign progress less frequently at higher level HQ.
- Consider establishment of an Assessment Cell either in the Plans directorate or as an empowered separate staff directorate to oversee the overall assessment process. Use some form of working group and board to coordinate staff input for decision and guidance.
- Assessment efforts within the HQ is a staff-wide responsibility, not simply that of the assessment cell. Consider assigning staff ownership for the various aspects or lines of effort (LOE) most closely associated with their staff responsibilities. This enables more comprehensive and qualitative input into the process, and ultimately provides a deeper and more accurate staff assessment to the commander.
2. Assessment Basics

Commanders, assisted by their staffs and subordinate commanders, continuously assess the operational environment and the progress of the operation. Assessment helps the commander determine progress toward attaining the desired end state, achieving objectives, and performing tasks. Based on their assessment, commanders direct adjustments thus ensuring continued progress toward accomplishing the mission. Staff-level assessments will typically inform (and be informed by) the commander’s personal assessment. Commanders provide balance between the staff reliance on quantitative indicators and limit data reporting burdens on their subordinate units. The commander develops his own assessment, in part through these staff assessments, but even more so through qualitative, subjective indicators collected through battlefield circulation, instincts, and discussion with subordinate commanders and stakeholders.

Assessment drives design and planning. Commanders use assessment to help decide whether to continue the current course, reprioritize missions or tasks, redirect resources or the allocation of forces, or even revisit campaign design or the operational approach to achieve overall mission objectives. As a result, they may provide additional guidance and intent to subordinates in the form of fragmentary orders, request additional support, or provide recommendations for additional diplomatic, informational, military, economic (DIME) actions from key stakeholders or external partners.

Focus of Assessments: Different level headquarters will likely have different assessment focus.

At the risk of over-simplification:

- Tactical level headquarters focus more on task assessment - whether they are performing assigned or implied tasks to standard (using measures of performance (MOP)) answering if they’re “doing things right.” MOPs answer the questions “was the task completed?” and “was it completed to standard?” (e.g., delivery of equipment, construction of a school, or seizure of an objective to specified standards) to assist the unit improve future performance.

- Operational level headquarters focus on OE assessment addressing whether they are achieving the identified necessary conditions (measures of effectiveness (MOE)-oriented) within the OE for mission success (e.g., progress in gaining support of populace or decrease in enemy activity) answering if they’re “doing the right things.”

- Theater level (i.e., Geographic Combatant Command-GCC) headquarters often look more broadly at campaign assessment within the area of responsibility (AOR) assessing whether they are achieving theater-strategic or campaign objectives (objective-oriented) answering progress toward “accomplishing the mission.” These HQs also often conduct long-term strategic assessments focused on theater engagement objectives and the associated application of resources.

Frequency and Venues for Assessment: Assessment should be continuous with numerous opportunities for informing and being informed by the commander. We’ve observed that tactical
and operational level headquarters conduct task assessments fairly frequently within the current operations event horizon (think hot washes after an operation). Opportunities for this type assessment at HQs are both formal (at daily and weekly update assessments) and informal (based on battlefield circulation, cross-talk, and other informal opportunities such as discussions with stakeholders).

Operational level headquarters (i.e., most of the JTF headquarters we observe) focus their efforts on assessing the OE at the appropriate frequency (possibly monthly or quarterly) to drive planning and prioritization. Venues for this level of assessment use MOE and range from formal to informal with formal assessments presented by the staff.

Theater-strategic headquarters normally focus on campaign assessment at quarterly or semi-annually frequency. These assessments are often more formal and fully inclusive with other stakeholders.

**Assessment Process Observations**

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**Examples of Indicators**

<table>
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<tr>
<th>MOP</th>
<th>MOE</th>
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| **Quantitative** | • Number of IEDs discovered  
• Rounds fired  
• Objective seized  
• School built |
| **Qualitative** | • Integration with supporting commanders  
• Understanding of assigned tasks |

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<tr>
<th>MOP</th>
<th>MOE</th>
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| **Quantitative** | • Number of IED discovered vs number of IED effective attacks  
• Forces or civilians injured |
| **Qualitative** | • Sentiments of HN leaders / populace on security situation.  
• HN commanders’ assessment on ability to provide security |
accomplishment. Likewise, measuring the wrong things can bias results and recommendations on the way ahead. For example, two different conclusions could be formed in the well known example from the World War II Battle of the Atlantic in which the leadership debated on how to measure success in the antisubmarine campaign; whether success was based on the number of submarines sunk or on the number of allied ships sunk. With the objective being protection of allied shipping, an assessment focused on reducing numbers of allied shipping sunk (not on subs sunk) caused a change in our antisubmarine campaign.

Another example accentuating the need to clearly define what we need to assess can be seen in stability operations in which we may incorrectly focus collection (and subsequent analysis) on how much aid/advice/assistance (MOP-oriented) the U.S. provides a host nation rather than developing indicators on how much (or little) the host nation needs our assistance (MOE-oriented). In this case, the MOP criteria (how much aid we provide) is not as relevant to discerning progress in accomplishing the mission as is assessing if the host nation is growing independent of our support (MOE focused).

**Qualitative Aspects of Assessment:** Operational environment and campaign assessment are tough and necessarily commander-centric. The commander is probably the best source of this subjective, opinion-based assessment due to his battlefield circulation, interaction with other commanders and stakeholders, and his intuition, experience, and instincts. Functional staff directors (not just the J2) can also provide qualitative inputs based on their focus. We find that the commander can assist greatly in this aspect by providing feedback on his perspectives to the staff (who are often stuck in the HQ) so they can better understand how he views the environment based on his circulation.

**Quantitative Aspects of Assessment:** We find that disciplined staff-centric quantitative input can help serve as a potential start point and a check for commanders’ more subjective qualitative indicators and assessment. Much of this quantitative aspect of assessment is framed to answer specific MOE or MOP developed by the staff planners to measure progress toward achieving objectives and mission accomplishment. This quantitative, “factual” data may also be required by national-level decisionmakers and supporting organizations. By its very nature, the quantitative aspect of assessment is very data-centric and requires a degree of mathematically-oriented, data processing capability.

There can be a penchant to over-engineer staff level assessments with massive amounts of data to both support the commander and ensure that the commander can objectively defend his assessment process, metrics, and recommendations to higher HQ (HHQ) and national level decision-makers. These larger, data-centric briefings can overwhelm subordinates with information reporting demands. We’ve also seen how some data-heavy assessments may not always clearly inform a commander’s personal assessment as they often lack the more subjective “why” and “so what” together with recommendations. Additionally, some assessments can tend to incorrectly focus on measuring level of activity versus actual progress toward achieving objectives.

**A Necessary Balance of Quantitative and Qualitative indicators for assessment:** Most HQs we have observed have noted the need to balance the above quantitative and qualitative approaches in assessment to reduce the likelihood of skewed conclusions. Commanders recognize this and provide guidance on achieving this balance. They avoid committing valuable time and energy to excessive and time-consuming assessment schemes and quantitative collection efforts that may squander valuable resources at their HQ and subordinate HQ that could be used elsewhere. They limit the amount of time and effort their staffs put into the collection and evaluation of quantitative indicators while recognizing their personal responsibility to apply their experience, intuition, and own observations in developing a more subjective, commander-centric, qualitative assessment.
Staff-wide Effort in Staff Assessment: Staff assessment within the HQ is a staff-wide effort, not simply the product of an assessment cell. Consider assigning staff ownership for the various aspects or lines of effort most closely associated with their staff responsibilities rather than restricting the assessment function to one staff section or cell. This ensures staff-wide inclusion in the assessment process, ensures qualitative input into the process, and ultimately provides a deeper and more accurate staff assessment to the commander. The commander can then use that staff assessment to inform and possibly enrich his assessment gained through battlefield circulation, key leader engagement and numerous other venues.

Recommendations Based on Evaluation of Assessment Criterion: A key staff challenge is developing and making recommendations to the commander on “what needs to be done” based on evaluation of the above noted quantitative and qualitative indicators. A related challenge is avoiding drawing erroneous conclusions between cause and effect especially regarding changes in human behavior, attitudes, and perception.

We often find that just thinking through and developing the “what happened,” the “why,” and the “so what” of assessment can consume the staff and they don’t get to what may be the most important aspect – recommending “what needs to be done.” Staff must make recommendations. It focuses their efforts, assists the commander, and can be a useful azimuth check between the commander and staff. Staff assessments and recommendations can help inform the commander’s personal assessment which helps enrich commander’s guidance for design and planning and intent for subordinates.

Insights:

- Focus the evaluation aspects of assessment beyond the “what happened,” to the “why and so what,” and the “what needs to be done.” We find that answering the “why” is the most important element as it will deepen understanding and drive the “what needs to be done.”
- Determine the type of assessment and the frequency of venues for the specific HQ corresponding to the level of the HQ, mission, environment, and available resources.
- Develop feasible MOE and MOP criteria during planning ensuring that the reporting requirements and evaluation workload are sustainable by the HQ and subordinates. Periodically review and update.
- Ensure command-centric qualitative, instinct and experience-based assessments inform and are informed by staff-centric quantitative assessments.
- Institute a process in which the commander provides feedback for the staff on what he has seen, heard, or experienced as he circulates in the battlespace to ensure the staff is aligned and understand his perspectives and subsequent decisions. We often find that the staff’s lack of understanding of the commander’s perspectives is a major cause for the staff not providing the commander what he wants in updates and briefs.
- Leverage other reporting requirements while minimizing separate, redundant assessment reporting requirements to minimize additional workload on subordinate units and staff.
- Develop staff-wide input to the staff assessment products to enrich the commander’s assessment.
3. Key Roles.

The Commander: As emphasized throughout this paper, the assessment process is commander-centric. The commander leverages staff and subordinate assessments, his own battlefield circulation and discussions with stakeholders, and his experience and instincts in developing a personal assessment. This assessment enriches subsequent guidance for design and planning, commander’s intent, prioritization, and ultimately execution in pursuit of mission accomplishment.

Subordinate commanders: Subordinate commanders assist in assessment by providing additional commander-centric assessments to the operational commander leveraging the same attributes noted above.

Chief of Staff (CoS): The CoS guides the staff-wide assessment effort to help inform the commander’s assessment and support decision-making.

Staff: Staff assessment is not limited to one directorate or cell. We find most commands assign staff ownership for the various aspects or lines of effort most closely associated with their staff responsibilities rather than restricting the assessment function to one staff section or cell. This ensures staff-wide inclusion in the assessment process, ensures both quantitative and qualitative input into the process, and ultimately provides a deeper and more accurate staff assessment to the commander.

As noted earlier, there can be a tendency to over-engineer staff assessment products as the staff attempts to build “unassailable” assessment products to ensure the commander can fully defend his assessment process, metrics, and recommendations to HHQ and national level decisionmakers. However, left unchecked, this can result in massive quantifiable briefings and overwhelm subordinates with information reporting requirements. These briefings may not always clearly support a commander’s assessment requirement nor optimally assist him in developing guidance and intent. Additionally, some assessments can incorrectly focus on assessing activity versus progress toward achieving objectives.

The staff critically reviews and attempts to eliminate assessment flaws such as “junk arithmetic” (e.g., small sample size in polls, poor correlation factors…), misleading color coding, excessive optimism, and too many metrics. They have found that staff assessment and recommendation products need to be factually based, current, defendable, honest, transparent, and inextricably linked to the determined objectives, success criteria, and, where established, the end state.

Assessment Cell Chief: Every HQ has some organization charged with coordinating the staff assessment process to inform and be informed by the commander. We find that the chief for this section should have recent operational experience. While having mathematically-oriented, operations research systems analysis (ORSA) expertise in the cell is extremely important, we find that the chief needs a broader perspective to better align and guide the cell’s activities to best inform the commander.

J2 (and Joint Intelligence Operations Center): The J2 plays an important role in assessment, particularly the OE assessment, since much of the information may be provided by the J2 / JIOC, and much of this data will likely be much broader than a military-only perspective.

Stakeholder Involvement: Many commands make conscious attempts to include non-governmental, interagency, and coalition stakeholders in arriving at their assessment. In most cases, perspectives from these stakeholders enrich the assessment process. Continuous collaboration between the military and the external stakeholders tend to break down barriers and helps enrich staff-wide assessment.
In some cases, assessment efforts support outside stakeholders (e.g., DoS, USAID, FEMA, and foreign governments). For example, in a humanitarian assistance operation, the military’s primary goal may be to serve in support of civilian efforts. Therefore, a measure of mission progress may be the reduction of military assistance to crisis response and move toward transition. Another example could be the measure of processing and moving U.S. citizens during a noncombatant evacuation operation.

**Insights:**

- Assessment must be commander-centric. In the end it is subjective. The commander has the best overall take on the progress of the unit toward mission accomplishment and must share his perspectives and assessment with the staff.
- The CoS ensures staff-wide support to assisting the commander in his assessment.
- Select an individual with recent operational experience as the assessment cell chief.
- Task the assessment cell chief to coordinate staff-wide input to assessment and provide a balance of “defendable” quantitative data with qualitative information to enrich the commander’s assessment.
- Ensure the entire staff understand that they all play a part in assessment.
- Some assessments incorrectly focus on assessing activity versus progress toward achieving objectives. Don’t confuse activity with progress.
- Interagency and multinational involvement add value to the assessment process; they share their perspectives and enrich (and can influence) the process.
- The indigenous forces (e.g., host nation security forces) must also be brought into the assessment process. This helps validate findings and can assist in transition planning (i.e., transfer of responsibility to the host nation forces).
- Conduct periodic commander conferences to share assessment perspectives. These help ensure command-wide “deepening” of understanding of the OE, the force’s progress toward mission accomplishment, and necessary changes.
4. Organizational Implications.

Assessment Cell: Recognizing that the commander is at the center of assessment, we have seen that an assessment-focused staff element can assist in coordinating the staff efforts to inform and be informed by the commander.

Two overarching points:

- We find that this staff element must be sufficient in size to coordinate efforts and manage information in developing staff assessments, but not so large that it takes on the entirety of the assessment function with the increased tendency to develop additional burdensome reporting requirements to independently build a stovepiped assessment. It also ensures others have to participate and keeps the process “honest.”

- Proper placement of the assessment staff element is also important. Up front, we’ve seen most assessment staff elements placed in the J5. We find that placement must take into account appropriate staff oversight and integration with the entire staff. We have seen the potential for the assessment element to take on the focus of the particular staff directorate with which it is associated. For example, if it resides in the J2, it could have more of an intelligence collection or enemy focus, in J3 an operational execution focus, and in J5 a plans focus. Likewise, if it is directly subordinate to the COS, it may not have sufficient principal staff oversight. We’ve seen most HQ place the assessment element in the J5 with clear direction that assessment is a staff-wide function. Wherever placed, it must have senior staff backing.

The assessment cell orchestrates information, analysis, assessment, and recommendations from across the staff, subordinate units, and stakeholders to inform the commander and gain the commander’s personal assessment (see figure as an example of the amount of reported data). This includes the responsibility to collate, analyze, and share logical and defendable products to support the commander’s assessment. Thus it is beneficial to include ORSA type personnel in the cell. This cell normally also has the responsibility of sharing the commander’s assessment to HHQ and relevant stakeholders.

The cell normally forms the core of a working group that supports development of the staff assessment. It also supports planning teams in refining desired (and undesired) outcomes, MOEs, MOE indicators (MOEi), and assessment criteria developed by the staff planners in support of those conditions. The assessment working group also supports periodic validation of existing objectives/desired outcomes.

Insights:

- Consider the establishment of an assessment cell to oversee the overall assessment process in the J5 or as an empowered separate staff directorate.

- Resource the assessment cell to coordinate, analyze, and share assessment information.

- Guard against the tendency to over-engineer processes and request so much data as to overload subordinates.

- Use a working group to bring together staff, subordinate, and stakeholder input to assessment.

Source: Regional Command in AFG (modified)
5. Staff Assessment Products

Staff assessment products should directly support the commander’s requirements:

- Deepen understanding of the OE.
- Measure progress toward achieving objectives and accomplishing the mission.
- Inform commander’s intent, guidance for design and planning, prioritization, and ultimately execution.

**Tailored Products** (these are focused more on OE and campaign assessments) The figure on the right presents various ways to present information to the commander. Up front, we find that staff products need some form of means to explain change, trends, and future requirements (e.g., host nation forces must be mission capable by “X” date to participate in a planned operation). This helps place recommendations in the proper context.

Several commanders use geographically-based products that use red, amber, green color-coding on maps depicting “status” of the OE. These allow tracking over time of progress, provides easily understood and granular understanding for the operational commander, and provides a common framework to allow sharing and discussion among commanders. Others like stop-light charts and thermograph charts. We find that the staff must understand how the commander wants to get information in order to best craft products. Additionally, staffs need to ensure clear connections between the objectives and the metrics they are using.

Identification of staff ownership (OPR) for tracking the objectives and conditions is important in staff-level assessments. The adjacent example (figure) depicts this together with a technique of depicting information. In this example, the J9 and J35 are responsible for assisting in answering the overall question of whether or not the Humanitarian Assistance Line of Operation is progressing. An individual from that particular J-code, acting as the OPR, has the responsibility of ensuring that the other J-codes are supporting the process. The right side of the figure shows the various J-code who “own” the MOEs for this operation. This example shows a combination of quantitative and qualitative information in assessment.

**Insights:**

- Answer the questions: “what happened,” the “why and so what,” and the “what needs to be done.” Focus products on the type of assessment: task, OE, or campaign.
- Products need to be kept simple or you risk confusing the message – particularly if used with host nation / non-english speaking leaders, or in coalition operations and with our interagency partners. It is very easy to lose sight of the key points when briefs become too complex.
- Staff assessments should provide recommendations to the commander based upon the assessment. These recommendations are normally not developed by the assessment cell, but rather by the affected / responsible staff focused on specific LOOs/LOEs and MOEs.
- Be cautious in using “junk arithmetic,” overly simplistic color coding, excessive optimism, and too many metrics. Be sensitive to overly simplistic cause and effect conclusions. Assessments and recommendations need to be unbiased and transparent.