



The communicator's forgotten responsibility

— by Maj. Frank W. Ogden —

One of the most important responsibilities of a tactical communicator is subscriber education, a responsibility that is being neglected. And this neglect causes more problems for the communicator than does faulty equipment.

Oftentimes, especially in technical fields, we “experts” become so engrossed in our work that we take for granted the level of knowledge the layman has with our technical gadgets. Soon, through lack of discussion and planning within our ranks, the duty of insuring the user knows all he needs to is forgotten.

Stand in any TOC (Tactical Operations Center) for 30 minutes and you will soon see what I mean. The TOC personnel (officers and NCOs) focus

exclusively on that one means of communications they feel comfortable using — normally because they know how to operate the device at hand, not necessarily because they understand how to use it effectively. As soon as that means fails to do what the users think it should, the comfortable feeling is quickly replaced by frustration and confusion. The cause is obvious: no one has taken the time to explain the systems/networks to them.

When I see this happening, I walk over and simply ask, “Who are you trying to get a hold of?” Rarely — thanks to my knowledge of the capabilities and flexibilities engineered into the networks — is there a time when I am unable to make contact with the distant party. And this applies not only

to phone calls but to all our means. The reason is simple: I know how to use all the means available, and, through education, so should our subscribers. They are seldom awed by my accomplishments; rather, I usually hear grumbling: “This stuff is just too complex to learn during a short exercise period. Can't you guys just give me something simple and reliable to use?”

Then it becomes necessary to go into a salesmanship routine. I sell them on the fact that the United States Army Signal Corps is the best in the world, has the best people and newest equipment, and that the users have more reliable ways of sending and receiving information than anyone doing their jobs in the past has ever had. Most important, I make them believers by

Subscriber education

explaining the systems and networks so they can understand and use them as effectively as I can.

All this is what I consider being a successful "front-man." And, in order to be successful, I must completely understand the products and services I represent before I attempt to offer them to anyone. In our field of Combat Support, that means understanding what signal support unit(s) can and cannot do before I offer or commit their services. Once I know this, I can discuss requirements versus services and educate my subscribers.

There are several items I carefully consider before, during and after each exercise, or each time I plan a system or a network. Careful consideration of each is critical to a successful signal exercise and to insuring the battlefield commander has effective communications.

Understand the requirements

You must visit each staff office and unit you will be supporting and find out what they need and expect from you. Don't just engineer and install the systems based on what you perceive or on the premise that by "maxing-out" your capabilities everyone will be satisfied. Of course, you must include your own requirements, but understand what your commanders and their staffs need in order to control and win the Air-Land Battle.

Bounce the requirements against your capabilities (do this back at your office). Then go back and explain what you can and cannot support. Don't wait until the next staff briefing. Be sure everyone understands your communications plan, as it effects them, before the briefing. It's simply good planning and it eliminates the possibility of being called-down by some irate staffer or commander who has just been told he is not getting what, up until now, he's been planning on.

Understand your unit(s) capabilities

You must know your unit's capabilities in order to weigh the requirements. Too often C-E staff officers commit their supporting signal units by comparing requirements against TO&E capabilities. It just won't

work that way. The operational readiness capability of your supporting units is the only true measure of the requirements you can guarantee (and the wise planner will not commit over 80% of what is operationally available). Don't rely on the last readiness report to do your planning, either. Go visit the unit's S3 and sit down and explain the requirements and make the decision a joint effort. This may sound trivial or SOP, but the lack of internal coordination, before the unit is committed, has ruined many a day for the too energetic, quick committing signal officer. Remember: gather the requirements and take them home before you say yea or nay to anyone. And realize that those things which doctrine and TO&E say are a unit's capabilities seldom match what, in fact, a unit can do (because of differences in equipment, personnel or training).

Present your communications plan orally

Now that you are properly armed with valid information, prepare an oral briefing for those you will be supporting. This is the first major opportunity to educate your subscribers. Set a date and ask the commander or staff officer to gather as many of his personnel as he can for your briefing. You want maximum exposure. It is vitally important to speak in terms and use visuals that they will understand. Don't brief from the radio-relay diagrams you worked up in your plans. Use visuals that reflect the means you will provide, the units they will service, and how they, the users, can access and use these means. Present the information in terms the user will understand and remember. Just because our field is technical, we don't have to prove its technicality by "gee-whizzing" everyone each time we speak. My point is that we must analyze our audience before going on-stage; the charts and words used before fellow-signalers will be very different from those used before the S3 and his staff.

Present your communications plan in writing

Try to leave your audience with a written concept plan that depicts the

same message you just briefed. Realize, that what you're conveying is a concept plan written for your subscribers, not an operations order or communications plan for your signal unit. The purpose of this concept plan is to reinforce what you briefed and to provide material to educate those who were unable to make the briefing. The concept plan may be no more than a reduced copy of the visuals you used, with a paragraph, or two, of explanation; however, it is another step in assuring that everyone — user and supporter — understands each other and in assuring that the capabilities and limitations of the systems and networks are being learned.

One document I massage many times before it is published is the field telephone directory. These pages are read by more people than any other document communicators produce, including the CEOI. So, why not use it effectively and publish it in words that assist the reader not only in the use of the tactical telephone, but also in message handling, radio net usage, and so on, to include all the means available? This document can serve as a ready-reference for your subscribers and can assist them — and you — tremendously if it is carefully prepared.

Don't write it so only an electrical engineer can read it, don't make it so bulky that no one will pick it up, and don't include a lot of extraneous material that is not relevant to the battlefield (national precedence authorizations and who can declare war, for example). Do include a short "how-to" on all the means employed; do use explicit, easy to use diagrams (spend extra time preparing these because you will find these pages soon torn out of the directory and taped on the tops of your subscribers' desks); and do make finding something in your directory easy (a good table of contents and an index). Finally, have your drafts reviewed by technical experts and nontechnical people before going to print.

Keep everyone informed

Part of the process of educating the subscriber includes his learning what to do when a system goes down. This learning process has been dealt with above, but in order for your student to react as you've taught him, he must know when to react. Care must be exercised here because we communicators tend to live and die by outages of as little as 15 minutes or less. And such

MAIN TO:	SECURE TELEPHONE	NON-SECURE TELEPHONE	MESSAGE SERVICE	FM	FAX	DATA	AS OF: 1545
TAC		N/A			N/A	N/A	
Jump TAC		N/A			N/A	N/A	
1st Bde	1545	N/A				N/A	
2d Bde		N/A				N/A	
3d Bde		N/A			0915	N/A	
DIVARTY		N/A			N/A	N/A	
CORPS ARTY	N/A				N/A	N/A	
DISCOM	N/A			N/A			
ENGR	N/A				N/A	N/A	
CORPS MAIN				1323			

NOTES:

1. Time in block indicates time means became unavailable
2. N/A - not applicable

Figure 1. Communications means status chart for TOC display.

short outages are relevant to the users.

Prompt status reporting is crucial to maintaining a good communications awareness throughout the battlefield. Some signal organizations allow their equipment operators to take a system down for maintenance for periods of 15 minutes, or less, without reporting it or without prior approval. That may be OK in fixed-station units, but in the tactical arena, it cannot be tolerated. SYSCON (or whatever it's called now) must account for every minute of downtime and should not authorize outages, other than in emergency situations, without first coordinating with the TOC representative. Then the outage should be scheduled so advance notice can be given to the subscribers before the plug is pulled. I've seen too many planned 15 minute system alignments turn into outages of hours, so unless the system can't pass intelligence, it should be left alone.

The best method for keeping everyone abreast of the situation is the use of TOC representatives. These are people from the signal unit or C-E staff, who reside in the TOC 24 hour a day. The value of these people cannot be over-estimated. Their job is to keep their unit informed of happenings in the TOC and in the exercise and to sense the pulse of the communications from this perspective. They also keep the TOC personnel informed of the communications status through status charts, announcements over the closed-circuit TV or intercom systems, or by going around and telling everyone personally.

I've seen quite a few variations in status charts; some were too complex and others were too vague.

An effective status chart for use in a TOC is shown at figure 1. Note, I do not differentiate between HF and UHF in terms of message handling; how many in the TOC really need to know that the HF link into 3rd Brigade is out? What they do need to know is when a message to 3rd Brigade can't be delivered, other than by courier. As long as the UHF message channel to the brigade is passing traffic, the job is getting done; the HF outage should be of great concern in the SYSCON van, but not in the TOC.

If your education program was a good one, your users will know how to alt-route calls, how to use different means to get their information through, or how to simply endure the outage with you; regardless, it will be a common problem understood and appreciated by everyone.

Have an aggressive PR program

Public relations is perhaps the capstone of the process of subscriber education. Everyone of us must make a conscious effort to publicize our profession, but we must strive to do it professionally. Perhaps the best way to be successful at PR is to take your subscribers on a tour of your signal sites. Individually or collectively try to get them all out and emphasize the magnitude of effort going on in their behalf. Not only will you be furthering the education of your subscribers, but

you will be increasing the morale of your troops tremendously. Don't go overboard with the requirements placed upon the troops, or the results will be negative; however, every team chief should, by SOP, have a short briefing prepared at all times. The impact on routine work should be kept to a minimum, and this can be done if your unit runs a tight ship. By all means, never take a visitor on-site unannounced. The bottom line is project your profession, professionally.

To be successful, we must: understand what our commanders and their staffs need to control and win the AirLand Battle, understand what our signal unit(s) can and cannot do, brief those we will be supporting, provide our subscribers with written assistance, keep everyone informed on the signal situation and have an aggressive PR program.

If we all make an effort toward these goals and strive for maximum exposure when selling our services, the education process becomes second nature and our profession is professionally represented, not only by us "experts," but also by our students.

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