
Need to Change from Vertical to Horizontal Thinking

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Introduction

The army is a diehard vertical organisation. Every element is structured and follows a rigid chain of command. Our day-to-day functioning epitomises everything associated with a vertical organisation. It has its own benefits such as leading to a structured way of working i.e. passing of orders and execution of tasks. It reduces ambiguity, compartmentalises work, makes clear-cut division of responsibilities, and creates an environment for an organisation to run like well oiled machinery. However, both the dynamics of war and peace-time requirements have changed and there is a demand for greater flexibility and innovation in a rapidly changing world. Hence, the need to understand the dimension of horizontal organisations and horizontal thinking. Horizontal vs vertical is a debate which has caught the imagination of the corporate world as they wish to streamline their organisations and refine their processes for better profitability. The industry and corporate world constantly needs to innovate due to the very fierce competition for their products in the market from their peers. The analogy is equally applicable if not more to the military as their adversaries are consistently striving to improve and get better. If the armed forces have to come out victorious in the next conflict, they need to be better and smarter than their adversary. Can thinking horizontally help us get better ?

The aim of the paper is to examine whether we in the Indian Army need to think in a horizontal manner rather than the traditional vertical way to improve its operational efficiency.

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Vertical vs Horizontal

Vertical vs Horizontal Organisations

Before we try to understand the consequences of the change, it would be mandatory to understand the concept of vertical and horizontal organisations and thinking. A vertical organisation is one which has a hierarchical organisational structure. It has a laid down chain of command in tiers and no one tier can function independently without the knowledge and support of tiers above or below it. It is called vertical because each successive tier is bestowed with greater power and responsibilities. Decision-making, which is a key component of any task, flows from top to bottom in a vertical organisation. Horizontal organisations in comparison are developed keeping mission, tasks and goals in mind. They revolve around core competencies of the groups or units and create a parallel organisation where each group/unit works towards achieving the stated objectives. These do not have a rigid chain of command as the organisations are task oriented and each supports and contributes towards the whole. A typical horizontal organisation is not 100 per cent flat but has a significant level of flatness in terms of command and control.

Vertical vs Horizontal Thinking

The difference between the two types of organisations was highlighted above. The concept of vertical vs horizontal does not restrict itself to the organisational structure alone but spills into many other facets like vertical vs horizontal thinking, integration, communication and process. All these, in a different manner, try and convey the same meaning. Vertical thinking is thinking within the realms of known boundaries and horizontal thinking is thinking beyond the realms of known knowledge. Vertical thinking is thinking with conventional wisdom and horizontal thinking is thinking out of the box. It is necessary to understand that the concepts of vertical and horizontal cannot be isolated from each other. Vertical organisations and thinking make the base for horizontal organisations, and innovative ideas. The combination of both concepts is a must for continued refinement of processes and tasks.

A military planner and thinker must be able to appreciate the advantages of the horizontal approach so that he is able to use and apply these both in day-to-day matters and operational planning. The army is familiar with the vertical approach because of the rigid command under which it functions. The horizontal approach, however, is new and needs to be understood. Since the horizontal approach is suppose to provide out of the box solutions to

problems, it implies that, if followed, it would provide dividends far greater in proportion in comparison to the resources used. If somehow the army or armed forces can adopt horizontal thinking and processes in operations, the payoffs are likely to be rich during conflicts.

Today, it is common for commanding officers to give cell phones to individuals who are sent out of the units either on temporary duty or out of town detail overnight, and they insist that these individuals report to them about their whereabouts and the details of the task completed. This common practice today

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has defied the age old tradition of up the channel reporting where the last link in the chain was the commanding officer. The vertical chain has given way to horizontal linkages. The enablers are technology and the need for timely information. Horizontal thinking in the army can help to perform tasks more efficiently. Since technology enables tasks to be performed better and information to flow faster, it becomes the operating system on which horizontal thinking can be based.

Where Are We ?

So it would be incorrect to state that the army is a purely vertical organisation. It may be vertical in terms of resources, but it has, to some extent, followed the horizontal philosophy. The Services organisations have a greater horizontal employment approach than the arms/operational organisations. For instance, the entire medical branch of the Indian armed forces is fairly lateral. No distinctions are made at a medical facility among the three Services between officers and men. They can be posted seamlessly into either of the sister Services. Similarly, the Army Service Corps (ASC) can supply rations to any formation irrespective of its parent chain of command. These have helped economise on resources as also broken inter-Service barriers. On the operational side, signals is one arm which has provided cross-connectivity with a reasonable amount of success.

Where Do We Need to Go ?

It is hard to think of an absolute state and a pure horizontal organisation in any sphere. There would always be hierarchy. This hierarchy would be less in profit

oriented organisations and more in the military type of organisations. What should the army be looking at? That is a very difficult question to answer. However, even if it starts thinking horizontal, it would have made a good beginning. Since the army has already made substantial progress in Services matters, it needs to concentrate on operational matters. So what are these areas that the army should be looking at? These have been discussed below.

Rapid Grouping and Regrouping of Organisation Formations

This is a basic necessity for operational efficiency in the rapidly changing battlefield. To exploit the fleeting windows of opportunities, it would be essential that field formations are adept at understanding the ever changing tasks that they would be required to undertake. This involves:

- (a) **Understanding Flexibility as a New Paradigm.** Commanders need to have flexibility of mind. They would be required to know the overall intent of the higher commander and have greater battle awareness. They might have a certain task to start with, but it could change a few hours later. Therefore, the staff must be in the full picture of the battle situation to enable formulateion of new orders. The flow of information must be horizontal, i.e. from one formation headquarters to another, specially the neighbouring formations as also formations in whose wake the others are moving. Information needs to flow both horizontally and vertically. Without situational awareness, this flexibility is hard to achieve.
- (b) **Sharing of Vital Resources.** The concept of horizontal thinking would be a non-starter if the army does not understand the need to share vital resources. These vital resources would be surveillance, targeting, communication or even artillery.
- (c) **Training of Formations.** While grouping and regrouping is expected, it is easier said than done. All the troops must be trained to understand the various tasks involved in grouping and regrouping. Such a phenomenon should not be thought of only in mechanised formations in manoeuvre warfare but even in the mountains. What it involves is changing mindsets about the type of role and task a formation is likely to undertake. Even at battalion level, defensive formations must be trained to undertake offensive tasks in the area of operations. This would take its toll on training. Collective training would assume as great importance as individual training, as formations would have to train with more than one type of formation, in more than one type of role.
- (d) **Need to Change the Rigidity of Command.** In the present day scenario,

formations and units are far too rigid about the chain of command. The army is focussed towards the set chain of command. If grouping and regrouping has to be effective, then all commanders in the chain must be able execute newer assigned tasks in the same spirit as would be true for the parent formation. This would involve greater interaction amongst commanders and better means of communication, both verbal and non-verbal.

Sharing of Resources

One of the greatest advantages of horizontal thinking is faster and better utilisation of existing resources. Every army is short of resources and, hence, their optimum utilisation is the key to successful execution of operations. Resources which would be critical in the battlefield are surveillance and targeting resources, communication and firepower resources. All these resources must allow across the board seamless utility. Let's discuss them in detail :

- (a) **Surveillance Resources.** Surveillance resources are always at a premium. Their employment is a precursor to any operation. Being a premium resource, it is heavily committed even, in peace time. Consequently, defensive formations could have a bias in their holdings. On the outbreak of hostilities, their reallocation is a necessity. This is being done even today, so what needs to change? Even if surveillance resources are being dedicated to formations for their respective tasks, their optimum utilisation is not taking place. The army needs to achieve seamless flow of information from all surveillance resources, irrespective of whom it is dedicated to. This seems to be a tall order today. But with digitalisation of surveillance equipment, specially its transmission and analysis, this could turn into reality. If the surveillance centres of formations are seamlessly connected, it would be possible to retrieve information from each other's data bank in real time.
- (b) **Targeting Resources.** Targeting is the logical conclusion to surveillance. If surveillance resources are at a premium, so are the targeting resources. The term targeting would mean any weapon which is used to target the enemy's

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tactical and strategic targets at the beginning or during the course of the battle i.e. from air power to small teams. For this to be possible, resources must know their targeting objectives. Which means having fire tasking orders (geographical locations and the effect required on the target). The overall theatre commander should be in a position to target directly or delegate responsibility based on situational analysis.

- (c) **Communication.** For the above two to happen, communication is the key requirement. Seamless communication to link both voice and digital is the key to horizontal thinking in war. Presently, while voice communication exists, it is not seamless. Since communication is the key to lateral thinking, it needs to be improved.

Towards this aim, it may be worthwhile to look at the possibility of incorporating the private industry in fast tracking the army's requirements. Issues of security notwithstanding, the civil industry's involvement would augur well as India is on the threshold of communication technology. Transfer of digital data is the weakest link in the army's communication set-up. Unless this is addressed, the horizontal way of operations would remain a distant desire.

- (d) **Firepower Resources.** To support the progress of the tactical battle, firepower is a very intrinsic requirement. Like all other resources, firepower would always be at a premium. Like formations, firepower means, especially, the artillery, must have a very flexible allotment. For artillery to be able to support the entire spectrum of the battlefield, it requires guns with enhanced ranges. Enhanced ranges would preclude the constant deployment and redeployment of guns which can, at times, be very difficult and time consuming. It is possible to allot artillery on a timed basis to support various tactical formations, if the guns have range and communication.

This would go a long way in addressing the problem of paucity of artillery, specially in offensive operations.

Issues of Command and Control. As a concept, horizontal organisation structures tend to reduce the pyramid or tiers of the command structure. Which means fewer leaders giving orders and greater number of executors of orders. Each member acts as both leader and executor. The team sets the targets for itself and tries to accomplish them. It precludes supervision and demands a high degree of initiative. How far is this possible for the army? In operations, it may not be possible to get rid of the traditional tiers of command, but the principle could be applied at the lower levels i.e. at company and below. Every man functions within

the higher commander's intent by showing greater initiative. The concept of directional style of leadership is in tune with horizontal thinking. As a corollary to this, operations can be planned more in small teams or groups as part of the whole. This concept may not be very practical in the plains, but is quite adaptable in the mountains and deserts where small operations can complement the main efforts, for greater value in comparison to the strength applied. The small team concept of special forces (SF) (paras) has elements of horizontal thinking. But if war-time requirements are to be met, the peace-time preparations must begin well ahead. Horizontal thinking militates against a rigid thought process and static relationships. If the army wants horizontal thinking to flourish, it needs to encourage new alignments. It could start at the brigade level. A brigade could have two or three tasks each under a different division headquarters. Each division headquarters could task the brigade and allotment could be based on a time or task basis. This suggestion may be derided as not serving anyone's interest. But unless flexibility is tried and allowed to succeed, the requirements in war would never be met. The onus would lie on both the higher and lower headquarters to allow the experiment to succeed. Otherwise, the issues governing command and control of formations would always precede issues of operational flexibility which is the key to the horizontal way of working.

Conclusion

There are many dimensions of horizontal thinking and its applicability. It has greater peace-time applications. In peace-time, there is the luxury of time and experimentation can be resorted to. The horizontal way of thinking can be applied in day-to-day logistic and administrative problems. But the most important issue is the need to change the thought process. The rigid quagmire of command and control set-up in the army does not allow out of the box solutions beyond a certain level. Unless at all levels of command the hierarchy as a whole appreciates and allows horizontal thinking, our resource utilisation will always be sub-optimal. The paper does not advocate giving up vertical structures and thinking so as to accommodate the horizontal processes — it only advocates thinking and organisation of structures horizontally in war and peace to get the better of the adversary.