# Reflections
## From a Deputy District Commander

*By Lieutenant Colonel Michael P. Carvelli*

Having had the honor of serving as a U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (USACE) deputy district commander (DDC) for several years, it is only appropriate that I reflect on and share my successes and failures. These shared reflections might help new DDCs before and during their tenures.

### Role of a DDC

The DDC is second in command of the assigned USACE district and serves as the district commander's principal military advisor. Each district also has a civilian deputy, the deputy for planning, programs, and project management (DPM). The DPM has programmatic responsibility and authority over all work in a district and is the senior civilian with authority second only to the district commander.[1] DPMs also serve as the chiefs of programs and project management divisions. In short, the DDC has military authority, whereas the DPM has programmatic responsibility.

A good model for understanding the difference between the DDC and DPM is a comparison of the relationship to relationships at an Army division headquarters. If the district commander were the division commanding general, then the DPM would have responsibilities similar to those of a deputy commanding general (DCG) for operations/maneuver and the DDC would have responsibilities like those of DCG–support. DPMs generally deliver the program on behalf of the commander, and DDCs support/sustain the delivery of the program.

The specific duties of each deputy vary depending on the size and function of the district; however, there are many commonalities across districts. Most DDCs can be expected to—

- Perform various duties focusing on specific issues, areas, or functions, as directed by the district commander and in coordination with subordinate technical divisions or general and administrative (GA) office chiefs. DDCs ensure that district headquarters and subordinate divisions/offices are integrated and that they effectively execute routine staff, management, administrative, and logistical activities. DDCs typically directly oversee (but might not supervise the chiefs of) the district programs for public affairs, readiness and contingency operations, safety and occupational health, and security and personnel protection. Although DDCs have differing supervisory responsibilities, most manage these programs on behalf of the commander in some fashion.
- Manage the district headquarters office staff to ensure that primary missions and programs are properly executed and serve as the district spokesperson in governance forums. Because these duties are shared with the DPM, it is best to gain shared understanding between the DDC and DPM about who owns what responsibility.
- Oversee staff operations and the planning of response and recovery missions during contingency operations. DDCs generally supervise the district emergency management technical division in fulfillment of these duties.
- Represent the district commander at ceremonies and events, as delegated. This can include participating in standard meetings, delivering remarks to civic groups (commonly with politically appointed officials present), and attending various functions.[2]

### "Commander" in Your Title

If you are assigned as a DDC after having recently served in a key and developmental position such as a battalion/brigade executive officer or operations officer or as a group/regiment staff engineer, it is critical to remember that you are now a DDC. You are no longer a staff officer; however, I will soon caveat that statement a few times.

Some USACE districts have chiefs of staff, others have executive assistants, and others have minimal or no executive office personnel. You will need to learn the nuances of your district in order to understand how GA offices execute routine staff work.

As a DDC, you will most likely act with more authority than you previously had as an executive officer or operations officer. You can create unwanted superfluous emergencies for your district simply by speaking or directing—just because you have the word "commander" in your title. Understand that districts do not have the same time horizons that you may have experienced in tactical units, and mete your direction.

Delegations of command authority to the DDC are common, as they help alleviate the commander of routine staff

work. Depending on your rank, you may serve as the appointing and approving authority for financial liability investigations for property loss, overtime requests, or myriad other items. Assume authority with a keen eye, as the responsibility can be overwhelming at times.

As a DDC, there will be times when you won't own your calendar or your day. You will be required to be in specific locations at certain times. However, you can block off time on your calendar for priorities. I recommend that you schedule your time at least 6 weeks out since chances are that your calendar will be empty except for battle rhythm events. Use your calendar as a weapon to arrange necessary meetings and protect time for priorities. Do this for your commander as well.

## Military Human Resources

USACE districts do not have military administrative offices; so, as a DDC, you will most likely serve as the district military administrative office. You should expect to manage all aspects of regular Army commissioned, warrant, and noncommissioned officers within your district. You will track all military human resources metrics, including evaluations, fitness tests, medical readiness, orders, deployments, and the mission-essential requirements cycle. Be sure to teach junior officers how mission-essential requirements work because they will most likely need to manage one in their next job. Some districts manage forward engineer support teams—alpha.

Learn how military officer positions are funded. Some receive regular Army funds, but many others are funded through district earnings. It may take a few interactions to understand the confusing process of paying military salaries through the Defense Finance and Accounting Service. The percentage of the district population that falls into this category is typically in the single digits, but the knowledge may be important when there are projects such as a change of command or safety investigation for company grade officers to execute.

## Budget

Perhaps the most daunting lesson that should be learned early on is how USACE fiscally operates. Authorizations, appropriations, apportionment, revolving funds, overhead, direct charging, regional rates, and carryover are a just few of the components of the massive learning curve ahead. USACE districts function similar to the way that nonprofit organizations function, but the general model doesn't account for all of the nuances. Ask questions, request more thorough explanations, and absorb the material. The learning curve can be intimidating, but you can learn the information if you engage your district leaders at a reasonable pace. Civilian employees do not expect you to show up understanding the entire process; they will be willing to teach you.

Critical budget personnel include the DPM, the chief of resource management, and the programs director in the programs and project management division. Additionally, each division and office could have access to different types of funds. For example, the chief of emergency management accesses funds that are not regularly used by any other technical division. It is worth reading the legislation contained in authorization and appropriation bills and researching relevant public laws such as Public Law 84-99, *Emergency Response to Natural Disasters*.[3]

The budget should be considered in every decision or change made within the USACE district. Making decisions without considering fiscal implications runs the risk of negatively impacting the district and the region. For example, you might be offered an additional commissioned officer through the Technical Engineer Competency Development Program—and you will probably be excited about having another officer in the district. However, you must determine how the addition of an officer will impact the district budget and, potentially, how it will affect the budget of a specific technical division. The month that an officer joins a district is the month that the district must begin funding that officer's salary.

## Employees

It is important for DDCs to understand how technical divisions generate income through projects in order to provide stakeholders the services they request. Most technical division employees charge their work to projects, thus generating USACE income. This project income pays for employee labor as well as district overhead, including rent, vehicle expenses, and fuel. This income also funds GA work, including the salaries of the employees who perform it. Timecards, leave, and the USACE Financial Management System can appear opaque if you haven't supervised civilian employees or been employed by USACE before. The good news is that all of that can be learned and USACE employees will be happy to educate you as you serve as their DDC.

Due to DDC supervision of emergency management in most USACE districts in the continental United States, you should understand how employees volunteer for duties or teams such as planning and response teams, forward engineer support teams–alpha, base development teams, crisis action teams, dive teams, Silver Jackets,[4] and others. Employees must disengage from their normal duties to serve in these positions and are sometimes deployed in or outside of the continental United States. The duties of everyone on these teams are important to the overall USACE mission. Apply your years of leadership experience to address issues and encourage employees to volunteer for these duties/teams.

## Supervisors

*Hiring managers* is a term often used to refer to supervisors. All supervisors are hiring managers because they are charged with the duty of backfilling positions of employees who depart. Due to existing organizational structures, USACE districts do not offer a full suite of human resources for supervisors—although some districts provide more services than others. Supervisors must perform whatever human resources responsibilities GA offices cannot or do not

provide. This is well understood by USACE supervisors but is something that you will most likely need to learn as a DDC.

When employees volunteer for emergency type duties or teams, USACE supervisors must redistribute the affected normal work. Sometimes, supervisors have a full workload and their teams suffer from the loss of an employee to a critical volunteer mission. DPMs own the workload-to-workforce projections and should have a good understanding of which supervisors are overloaded and whether there are viable solutions. As the DDC, you can assist the DPM in assuaging supervisors' concerns and reducing friction.

First-line USACE supervisors are required not only to carry out leadership duties but also to perform routine work. They still perform basic employee functions such as writing contracts, negotiating real estate agreements, or creating change orders. In conjunction with the DPM, you, as the DDC, will need to help educate supervisors about the tools available to address excellent/poor performance or conduct. You can also help them understand how to obtain assistance from GA offices, including the equal employment opportunity, public affairs, resource management, logistics, and communication offices and the civilian personnel advisory center. Supervisors should be engaged on a routine but not overwhelming basis.

Unfunded mandates for supervisors are common. Changes to supervisor training requirements, unexpected data calls, policy changes, and myriad other requirements place additional tension on these critical employees. No good organization survives with bad leaders. Find unique ways to relieve this added tension though education and personal engagement.

## Your Value

Although, you remain the DDC, you might also be appointed the project delivery team (PDT) leader for critical events or programs at times. A few salient examples of such circumstances include the Novel Coronavirus (COVID-19) response, talent acquisition, adjustments to the district battle rhythm, and the creation of a change management plan for the military table of distribution and allowances. When appropriate, you may need to become a PDT leader to allow USACE supervisors to focus on delivering the program.

Many districts have initiatives that should be implemented or changes that should be made; however, due to the way that USACE fiscally operates, not all districts can afford to institute them. If your district needs something advanced, you may need to act as the PDT leader, assemble a team, understand the problem, and institute an appropriate solution. Topics might include updating a district policy, creating a mentorship program, leading a supervisory professional development session, or adjusting a business process.

If you happen to find a short lull in your duties, don't be afraid to do the work of a PDT leader. The district needs that—but be wary of assembling PDTs too often, as you still have the word "commander" in your title. You don't want to distract the team from other, higher-priority efforts—or yourself from your commander's priorities. Remain focused on supporting delivery of the program, and always do what the commander needs to have done.

## Visits With Employees

Some USACE districts are geographically small and have few field sites; others span multiple states, with some locations hours away. Several districts have more than 1,000 employees; others have only a few hundred. Commanders are pulled in multiple directions, with requirements for time spent at enterprise/regional governance meetings or with congressional delegations, staff delegations, governors, tribal leaders, mayors, military leaders, or a panoply of other stakeholders. You are in the perfect position to visit your employees. Remember to take control of your calendar—and schedule routine visits with district employees.

Employees will see you differently than you see yourself. They will generally share more of their story with you than they are willing to share with the commander. Districts do not have chaplains or sergeants major, so use your position as DDC to speak with employees to gain shared understanding of sources of friction. Use your position to eliminate or reduce friction when district policies or norms stand in the way. Your employees will thank you for helping them solve what you might consider to be miniscule issues. Use your title only for good.

## A Grateful and Gracious Attitude

There are not enough engineer professionals to serve the growing needs of the government and private industry, yet all USACE employees are technical experts. You should become a technical expert at recognizing superior performance. This starts with a "Thank you." Thanking employees often and in public has a positive effect on retention. The many forms of appreciation that civilian employees can receive for great performance include monetary awards, commander's coins, service awards, de Fleury Medals, time-off awards, personal notes, e-mail messages of appreciation, and enterprise awards.

Most employees simply want their voices to be heard. Many don't have problems that you will be able to solve but will appreciate you listening to their issues. If you submit an employee's concern in an information paper, e-mail, or governance meeting, provide him or her with feedback when possible. The employee will appreciate knowing that you actively listened and followed through. He or she will also understand if you don't have the power to resolve the issue.

It can be difficult to understand that some civilian employees have spent more than 40 years in your district. You do not have the context that they do—and you never will. However, you have been appointed as the DDC because of your leadership abilities. You will be required to make difficult decisions and to recommend others to your commander. To the best of your ability, be gracious and understanding when you change a process that intimately affects an employee who has done it "that way" for the past 30 years. Explain yourself, and listen to the employee's perspective. It is okay

to disagree. And it is okay to choose a certain course of action because it is the way that the district should be operating. It is also critical to acknowledge employees' willingness to try something new for the betterment of the district.

## Conclusion

The position of DDC is an incredibly rewarding one. It is an honor to so directly serve the citizens of the United States. As a DDC, your employees protect lives and property, steward resources, enable the economy, and aid citizens in crisis. Cautiously wield your authority—but when you do wield it, be an expert marksman. You will never know enough; there are simply too many authorities, regulations, and nuances for a DDC to learn it all in 2 or 3 years. However, don't stop learning from your employees; they have thousands of years of combined USACE district service and are willing to shape you into the DDC that they need.

**Endnotes:**

[1]USACE Engineer Regulation (ER) 5-1-11, *Business Process*, 31 July 2018, p. 9, <https://www.publications.usace.army.mil/Portals/76/ER_5-1-11.pdf>, accessed on 18 January 2024.

[2]USACE ER 5-1-13, *U.S. Army Corps of Engineers Policy on Regional Business Centers*, 30 June 2017, pp. A-3–A-4, <https://www.publications.usace.army.mil/Portals/76/Publications/EngineerRegulations/ER_5-1-13.pdf?ver=2017-07-12-142353-397>, accessed on 18 January 2024.

[3]Public Law 84-99, *Emergency Response to Natural Disasters*, 28 June 1955, <https://www.govtrack.us/congress/bills/84/hr3878/text>, accessed on 18 January 2024.

[4]Silver Jackets are interagency teams that facilitate collaborative solutions to state flood risk priorities.

*Lieutenant Colonel Carvelli is the commander of the 1-410 Brigade Engineer Battalion, 4th Cavalry Multifunctional Training Brigade, Division East, 1st Army, Fort Knox, Kentucky. He previously served as the deputy commander of the USACE—New England District. He holds a bachelor's degree in civil engineering technology from the Rochester Institute of Technology, New York, and master's degrees in operations management from the University of Arkansas, Fayetteville; civil engineering from the University of Florida, Gainesville; defense and strategic studies from the U.S. Naval War College, Newport, Rhode Island; and military operations from the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, Fort Leavenworth, Kansas.*

