

Command or Control?

Decision on the Somme

1st July 1916

Stephen Bungay

What's the reason why?



Men of the Royal Irish Rifles, 36th Ulster Division

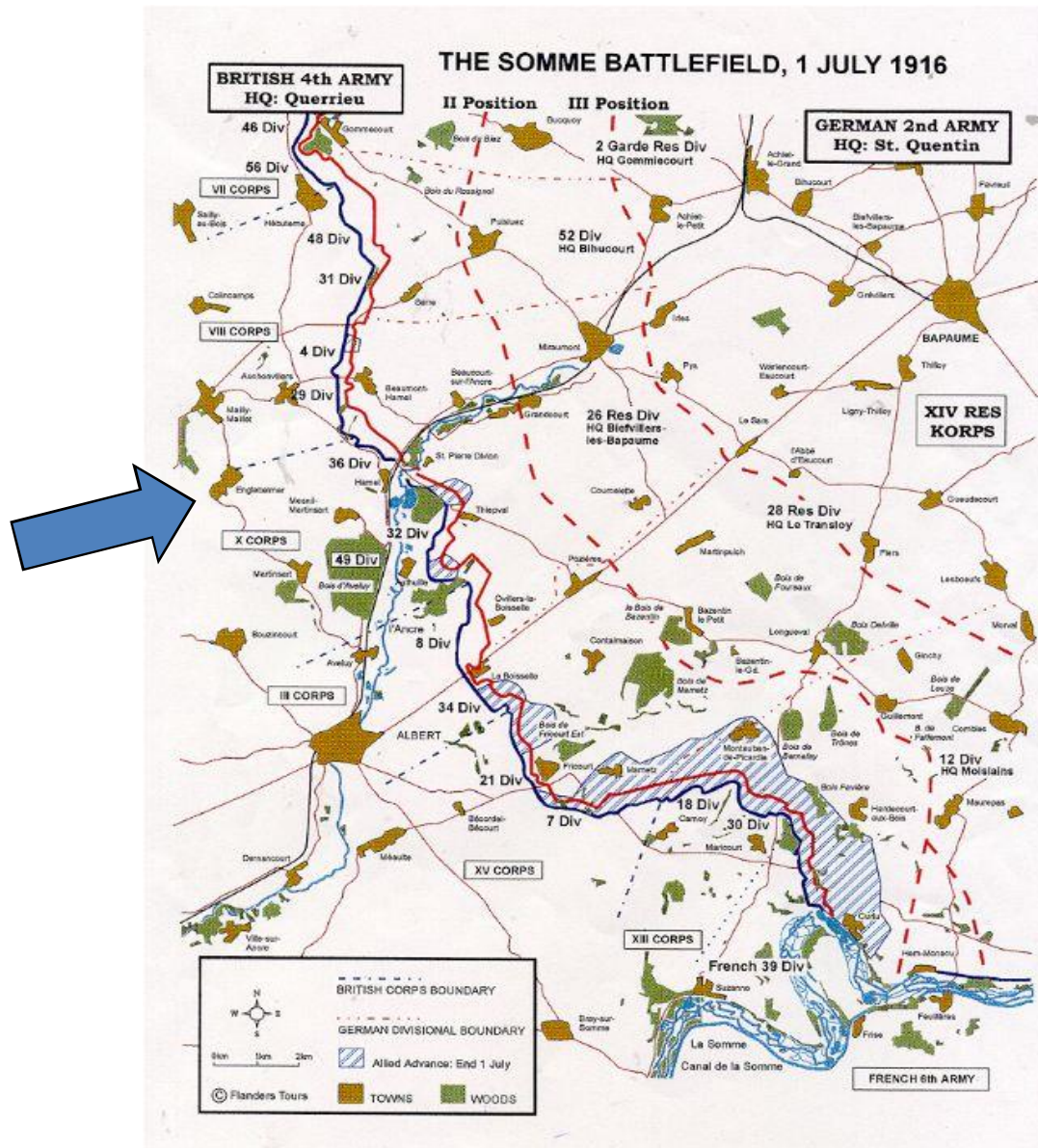
Somme, 1st July 1916

Machine gun team, 99th Reserve Regiment, 26th Reserve Division

Somme 1916



Fatal ground: the Somme offensive



Questions for today

How did decision makers behave on the X Corps sector on 1st July 1916 and why?

 What decisions were taken on both sides and why did the decision-makers do as they did?

 What pressures were they under and what direction had they been given?

 How did the culture and value systems of their respective organisations shape their behaviour?

Drilling down in causation means expanding in time

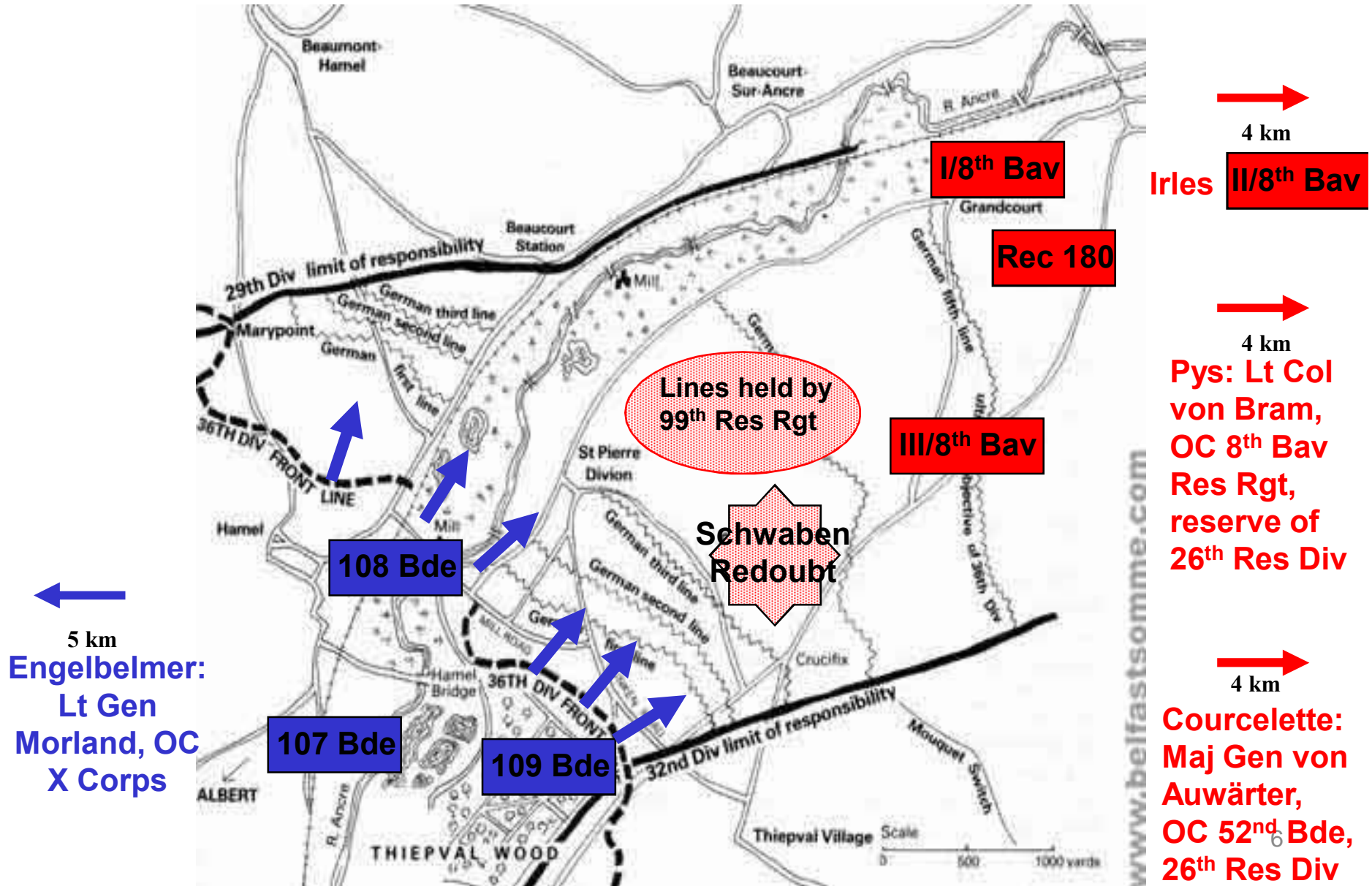
How did decision-makers behave on the X Corps sector on 1st July 1916 and why?

 Decisions: a perspective of *fifteen hours*

 Direction: a perspective of *five months*

 Culture: a perspective of *fifty years*

The attack by 36th Ulster Division, X Corps



The events in outline

- 7:30 am: 32nd Div attack Thiepval village, 36th Div attack north of the village on both banks of the Ancre
- 8:30 am: 32nd Div enter Leipzig Redoubt but are pinned down in front of Thiepval village; having left their trenches early and finding the wire cut, 109th Bde of 36th Div take German front line and are fighting for the Schwaben Redoubt
- 9:00 am: 107th Bde follows 109th Bde
- 10:00 am: Some parties from 107th Bde reach German second line ahead of schedule but are bombarded by artillery; 36th Div secure Schwaben Redoubt and dig in
- 2:45 pm: Germans begin counter attack on Schwaben Redoubt
- 4:00 pm: 49th Div (Corps reserve) attacks Thiepval; attack fails
- 10:30 pm: Germans re-take Schwaben Redoubt, X Corps withdraws

The results

X Corps suffered 9,643 casualties:

32nd Division: 3,949

36th Division: 5,104

49th Division: 590

26th Reserve Division casualties were ca 2,000, including 500 prisoners

36th Division captured ca 800 yards of front-line trench;

32nd Division captured Leipzig Salient

On 26th September, 18th Division under Maxse took Thiepval village,
and on the 28th the Schwaben Redoubt

1st Perspective: Decisions: 15 Hours

**Decisions and actions taken by
both sides, 7:30 am to 10:30 pm,
1st July 1916**

Read the material and discuss in groups:

The British:

- “ What general observations would you make about their decision-making?
- “ What pressures was Morland under and why do you think he took the decisions he did?

The Germans:

- “ What general observations would you make about their decision-making?
- “ What pre-conditions had to be in place to enable them to act as they did?

20 minutes

Units and ranks with abbreviations

- " Army
- " Corps
- " Division (Div)
- " Brigade (Bde)
- " Regiment (Rgt)
- " Battalion (Bn)
- " Company (Co)
- " General (Gen)
- " Lieutenant General (Lt Gen)
- " Major General (Maj Gen)
- " Brigadier
- " Colonel (Col)
- " Lieutenant Colonel (Lt Col)
- " Major (Maj)
- " Captain (Capt)
- " Lieutenant (Lt)

Key

British units in blue, German units in red, e.g.

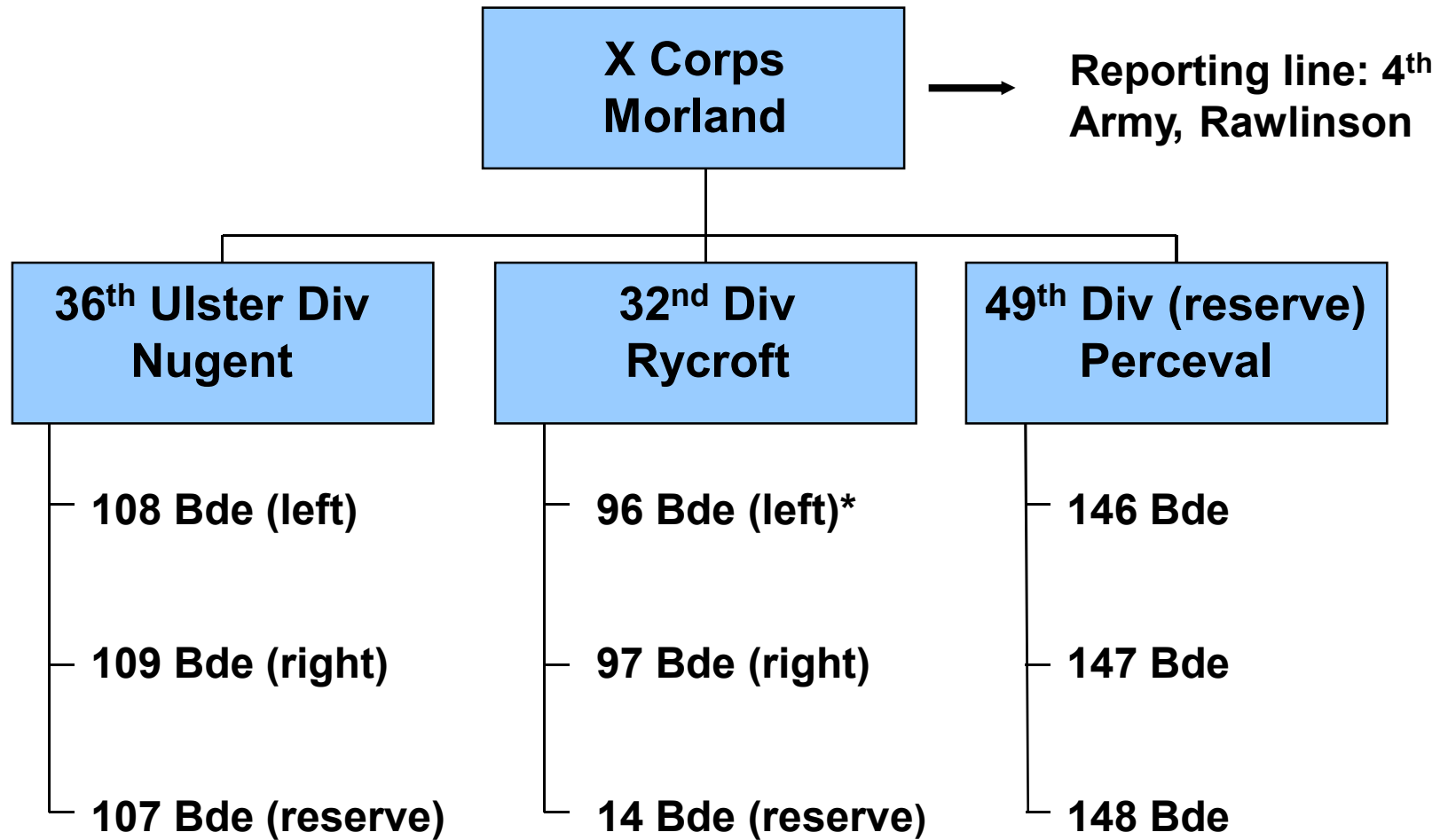
107 Bde = 107th Brigade (British)

II/8th Bav = 2nd Battalion of the 8th Bavarian Regiment (German)

An unusual unit:

Rec 180 = Recruiting Company 180 (newly trained recruits not yet assigned to front-line units)

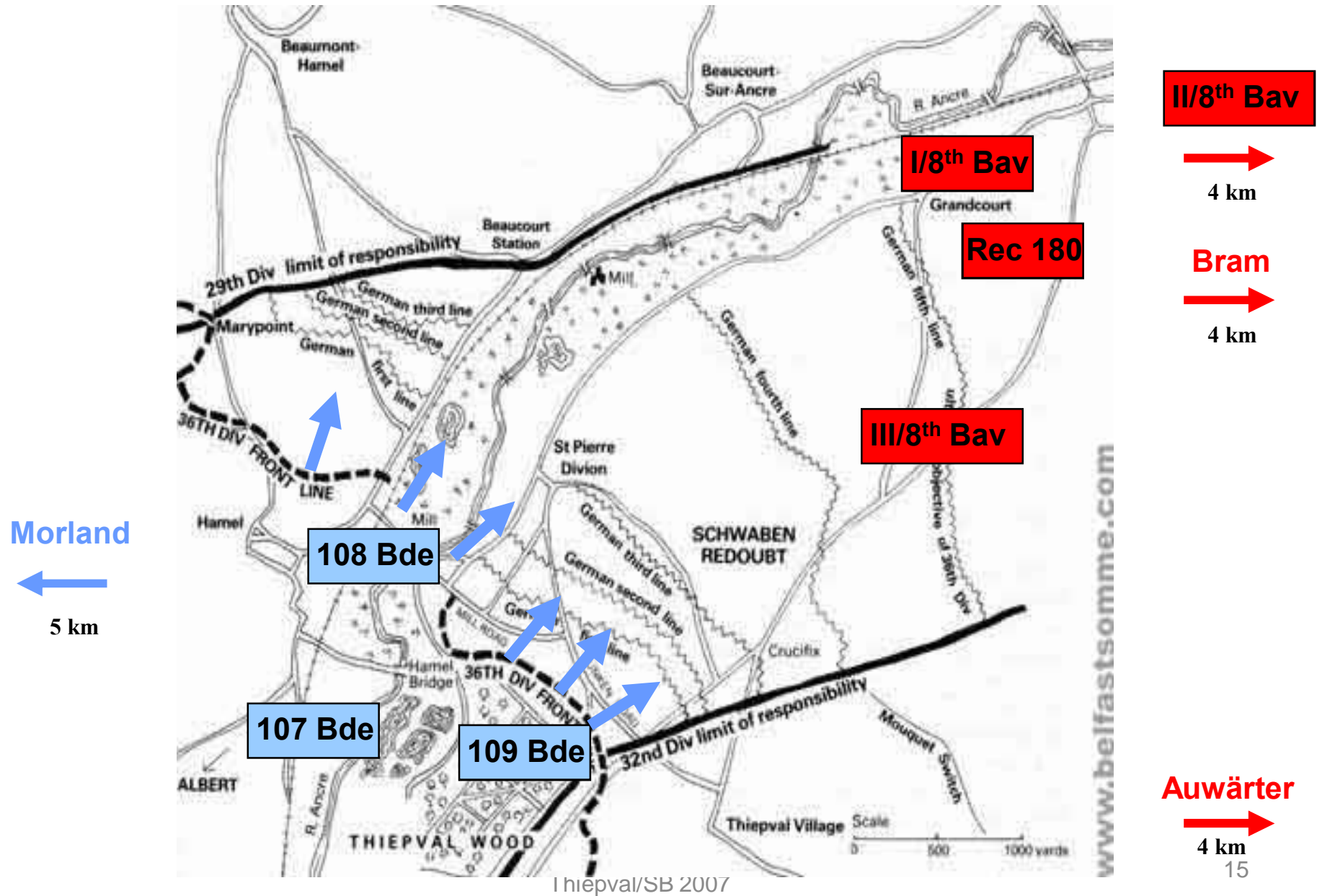
X Corps command structure



British decisions: morning

- 7:30: Attack opens, observed by Morland from Engelbelmer, 5km west of Thiepval
- ca 8:30: Morland learns of success of 109 Bde in taking Schwaben Redoubt, but that all his other brigades and neighbouring Corps are in difficulties
- 8:32: 36th Div asks Morland if they should proceed with 107 Bde's planned advance through 109 Bde to German second line; Morland decides to wait till more information comes in
- 8:45: 14 Bde (reserve of 32nd Div) moves to support failed attack on Thiepval
- 9.00: 107 Bde (reserve of 36th Div) comes under German shellfire from Thiepval and begins the attack planned for 10:10
- 9:16: Morland now decides to hold back 107 Bde and tells 36th Div; phone lines to them are cut and order to rescind does not get through
- ca 9:30: Perceval of 49th Div arrives at Morland's command post to request that his Division reinforce 109 Bde and turn German flank; permission refused

Situation at 7:30 am



Morland
←
5 km

II/8th Bav

→
4 km

Rec 180

Bram
→
4 km

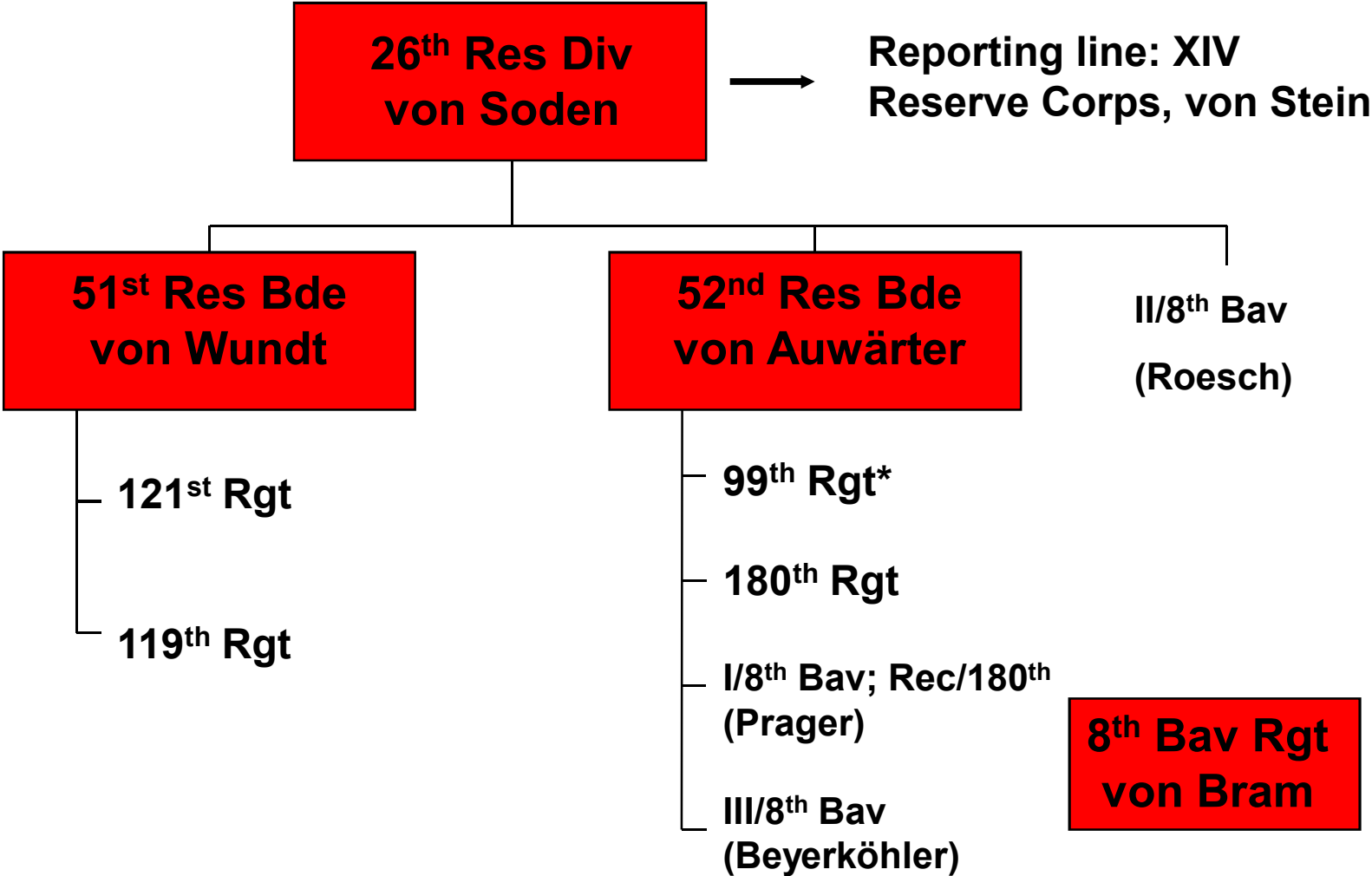
III/8th Bav

Auwärter
→
4 km
15

British decisions: afternoon

- 12:05: Artillery supports 14 Bde attack on Thiepval ordered at 8:45
- 14:30: Corps report states: 'The situation at Thiepval is still obscure. It is now going to be re-bombarded and attacked from the front. A part of 146 Bde will assist 32nd Division in this attack.'
- 15:30: 49th Division orders attack on Thiepval village to commence at 16:00
- 16.00: 36th Div told that 146 Bde of 49th Div is at its disposal. 36th Div orders 2 battalions of 146 Bde to reinforce Schwaben Redoubt, but 146 Bde is now engaged on 49th Division's attack on Thiepval
- 19:18: Six companies of 146 Bde try to reach Schwaben Redoubt
- 21:00: Some companies of 146 Bde arrive at redoubt as German barrage begins
- 22:30: Germans complete recapture of Schwaben Redoubt

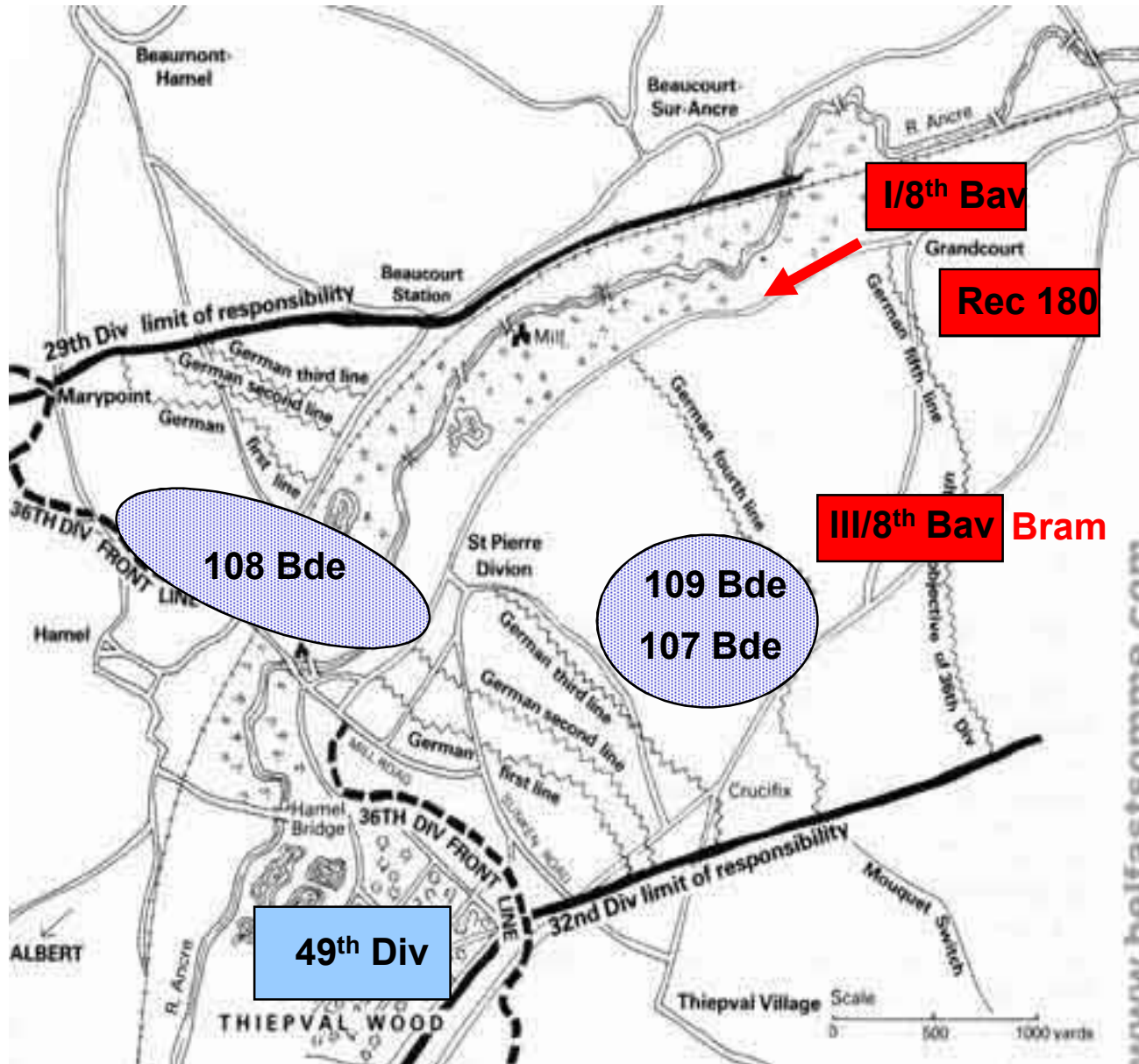
26th Reserve Division command structure



German decisions: morning

- 7:30: Von Soden, in Biefvillers near Bapaume, 20km from Thiepval, learns attack has begun
- 8:30: Von Soden told that Schwaben Redoubt has been lost; he orders II/8th Bav in Irles to hold the second position; runner despatched 9:00
- 9:30: Von Stein in Bapaume informed by 26th Div of loss of Schwaben Redoubt and orders its recapture; von Soden passes order to von Auwärter in Courcelette, 4 km east of Thiepval
- 9.55: II/8th Bav receives order von Soden issued at 8:30; they are now subordinated to von Auwärter, and move off
- 10:15: Von Auwärter orders I/8th Bav in Grandcourt and III/8th Bav in Stuff Redoubt to counter attack; von Bram in Pys receives order from 26th Div to report to von Auwärter in Courcelette 1.5 km away
- 10:45: Commanders of I and III/8th Bav issue orders for counter attack; von Auwärter receives order from von Soden not to wait for II/8th Bav to arrive but to counter attack immediately
- 11:15: Von Bram arrives at von Auwärter's HQ, is briefed and given responsibility for the counter attack

Situation at 1:30 pm



I/8th Bav



?

I/8th Bav

Rec 180

III/8th Bav Bram

108 Bde

**109 Bde
107 Bde**

49th Div

Morland



5 km

Auwärter



4 km

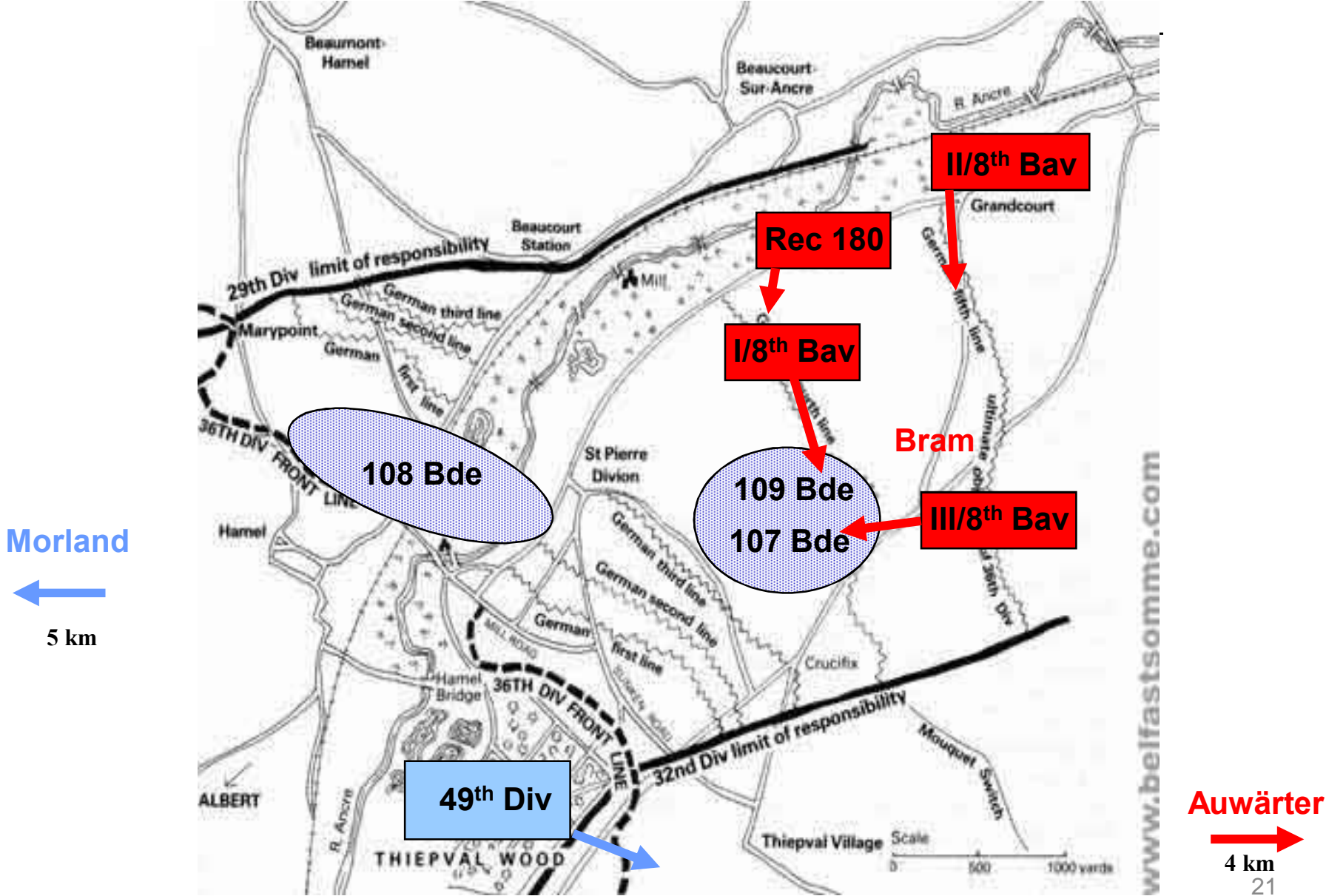
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German decisions: afternoon

- 13:00 Bram reaches Stuff Redoubt and meets Beyerköhler; decides to attack with III/8th Bav at 15:00 and arranges artillery support
- 14:00: Order from von Auwärter to counter attack issued at 10:15 reaches II/8th Bav on its way from Irles to Grandcourt
- 14:15: Prager issues order to Rec/180th to join I/8th Bav in counter attack
- 14:40: Rec/180th receives orders from Prager
- 14:45: I/8th Bav attacks independently; III/8th Bav also attacks
- 14:58: HQ 99th Regt learns of full depth of penetration and orders 14th company 99th Regt under Acting Lt Lunau to find out how far the British have got
- 15:00: Order from von Auwärter to counter attack issued at 10:15 arrives at I/8th Bav; II/8th Bav arrive at Grandcourt 5 hours after moving off
- 16:02: Von Soden issues direct order to Bram to re-take Schwaben redoubt

Situation at 4:00 pm

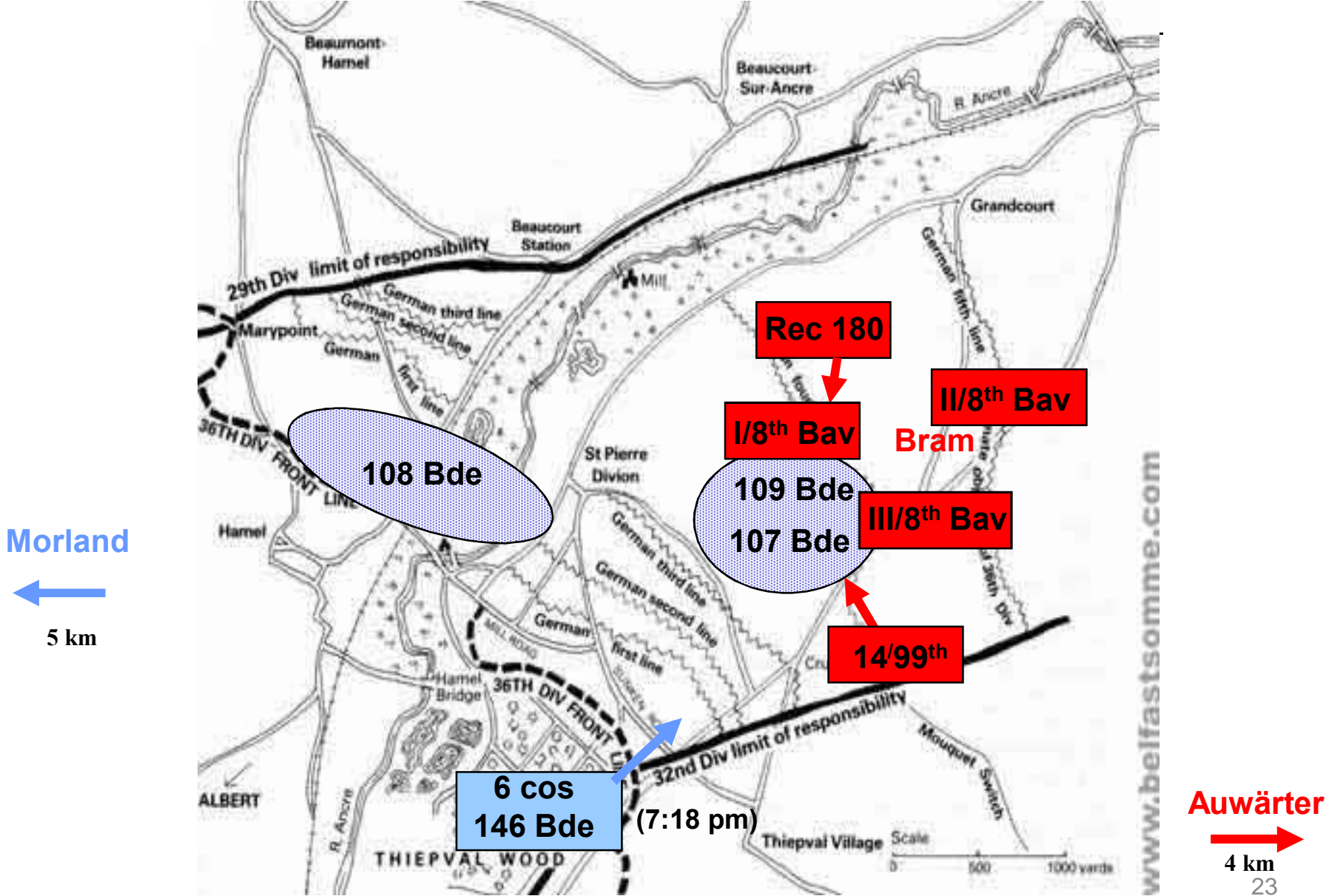


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German decisions: evening

- 17:00: Bram receives the order from von Soden; Beyerköhler killed, Hauptmann Wurmb takes over III/8th Bav
- 18:00: 14th Company 99th Regt arrives at Redoubt and without orders attacks independently of Bram; Rec 180th joins the attack
- 18:39: Some men from II/8th Bav arrive; report from von Bram requesting support reaches 52 Bde
- 19:00: Bram ordered by 52 Bde to contact artillery group to agree timing of final assault
- 20:27: Von Auwärter guarantees von Bram a one hour artillery bombardment in support of his attack
- 21:00: Artillery bombardment begins
- 22:00: Final assault launched, led by Hauptmann Wurmb; two battalions from Corps reserve arrive, but do not participate
- 22:30: Germans complete recapture of Schwaben Redoubt

Situation at 6:00 pm



Observations

British

- “ Single decision maker
- “ Unit commanders need permission to deviate from plan
- “ Importance of different objectives unclear during the battle
- “ Decision maker needs to gather information to make decisions
- “ Delays are caused by communications difficulties
- “ Decisions dominated by plan

German

- “ Multiple decision makers
- “ Unit commanders issue orders to their units independently
- “ Main effort is clear at all levels before the battle
- “ Decision makers get the information they need from direct observation
- “ Delays are caused by physical difficulties
- “ Decisions dominated by situation

2nd Perspective: Direction: 5 Months

Excerpts from the plans, orders and operational parameters of the British (blue titles) and German (red titles) Armies in the lead up to 1st July 1916

Read the material and discuss in groups:

From the evidence of these documents, what influence do you think the guidance given would have had on the decision-makers on the day?

What do they reveal about the higher command's view of their organisations and what is important?

What are the most striking differences in their approach?

15 minutes

The role of the Somme for the British

British agreed to attack on the Somme to relieve pressure on French at Verdun

Haig (C-in-C) wanted a breakthrough to open country around Bapaume and a roll up of the German line

Rawlinson (4th Army Commander) wanted a 'bite and hold' operation within range of artillery support

The role of X Corps: taking the high ground

X Corps objectives for 1st July:

Take Schwaben Redoubt and ground beyond up to fifth and final German line in front of Grandcourt, and clear area north of the Ancre to secure left flank of Corps (36th Div); take Thiepval village and strongpoints to the south to secure right flank of Corps (32nd Div)

X Corps and neighbouring III Corps were attacking the main objective: *'In the simplest terms, General Morland's Corps was to capture the summit features 2,000 yards beyond Pozières. They thus shared responsibility for seizing the northern half of the high ground on which Haig's plan depended.'*

(Farrar-Hockley, *The Somme*, London 1964, p. 104)

Planning

Objectives and frontage were defined by 4th Army, detailed planning was to be done by Corps, with considerable discretion for Corps commanders

X Corps planning began 7th March 1916 with continual input from Divisional commanders

4th Army reviewed Corps plans in late April; subsequent influence exerted through Tactical Notes

Neither Morland nor any of his Divisional commanders had worked together before: Corps make-up constantly changed

Decisions on the day depended on information: commanders from battalion and above told to remain at their HQ's to facilitate communication to Corps

Operational guidance: conference, 15th June

‘Reserves should not be wasted in impossible frontal assaults against strong places. They should rather be thrown in between these strong places to confirm success where our advance is progressing favourably, and to overcome the enemy’s centres of resistance, which are holding up neighbouring troops, by attacking them in flank and rear.’

‘Isolated advances by detachments, pressing forward beyond the reach of support, should be avoided. The ground gained is difficult to hold because the enemy can concentrate against these small bodies. The most gallant men are thus lost in vain. In the advance of the infantry therefore we should aim at such uniformity as will ensure mutual support.’

Operational guidance: General Staff instructions

‘All troops must move direct on their objective. Complicated manoeuvres, such as wheels and forming to a flank, must be avoided when possible.’

Instructions for the Training of Troops for Offensive Action, SS
135, December 1916

Operational guidance: 4th Army Tactical Notes*

‘We must remember that owing to the large expansion of our Army and the heavy casualties in experienced officers, officers and troops generally do not now possess that military knowledge arising from a long and high state of training which enables them to act instinctively and promptly on sound lines in unexpected situations. They have become accustomed to deliberate action based on precise and detailed orders.’

‘It has been rightly said that this war will be won by superior discipline and moral (sic). We undoubtedly started with the disadvantage of pitting an undisciplined nation against a disciplined one... Things which may appear trivial... are really of great importance, such as saluting, cleanliness, tidiness in dress, manner when speaking to superiors, strict observance of orders and instruction... Men must learn to obey by instinct, without thinking, so that in times of stress they will act as they are accustomed to.’

*** Written by Major General A. A. Montgomery,
4th Army Chief-of-Staff, issued 17th May 1916**

Operational guidance: 4th Army Tactical Notes*

‘Experience has shown that the only safe method of artillery support during an advance is a fixed timetable of lifts to which both the infantry and artillery must rigidly conform... No changes must be made in the timetables by subordinate formations without reference to Corps Headquarters or confusion is sure to ensue... Should, however, it be considered advisable by the Corps Commander to bring the lift back ample previous warning must be sent to all concerned and the programme readjusted to meet the altered situation... This re-bombardment is difficult to arrange and should not be resorted to if it can be avoided.’

‘The guiding principle is that the Commander of an Infantry Brigade should be where he can best control such reserves as he has at his disposal... Personal influence on the battlefield can, generally speaking, seldom be brought to bear under modern conditions... It is essential that communication from front to rear should not be lost.’

*** Written by Major General A. A. Montgomery,
4th Army Chief-of-Staff, issued 17th May 1916** 33

German operational practice: artillery

‘The use of artillery had become more and more of an art. Fundamental changes had been made to the principles developed in peacetime.

They worked above all towards much closer links between infantry and artillery. To this end, liaison officers were placed in front-line trenches of every regimental, and sometimes even battalion section... Every section had its own infantry battery, which were to be called upon primarily by the infantry.

To speed up target allocation, enemy positions were divided into numbered sections and marked on maps.’

Württemberg's Heer im Weltkrieg, Bd 6, I Teil, p. 103

The role of 26th Reserve Division: defending the most critical ground

‘The Schwaben Redoubt was a place of decisive significance. If the enemy were able to gain permanent possession of it, they would thereby not only endanger the whole position of the 26th Division on the south bank of the Ancre, but also render any effective use of the divisional artillery on the north bank almost impossible, as the batteries on that side were sighted almost entirely from the Redoubt.’

(Herbert Ritter von Wurmb, *Das K.B. Reserve-Infanterie-Regiment Nr. 8*, Munich 1924, p. 67)

Operational guidance: von Soden, order of the day, 26th June

‘In the coming days all the work and effort we have put into consolidating our positions over the last two years may well face its severest test. What matters now is to stand fast, to endure with fortitude, to do one’s duty and not to shirk any sacrifice nor spare any effort in order to repulse the enemy and secure victory. Every man must be aware that the ground we have won at such cost in blood must be held under all circumstances and that no British or French troops can be allowed to penetrate our lines unpunished. I know that all of you in the Division share these sentiments and I look forward to the coming events with complete confidence. With God for King and Fatherland will be our watchword! Freiherr von Soden.’

Source: *Württemberg's Heer im Weltkrieg*, Bd 6, I Teil, p. 108

Operational guidance: operational order to all units from HQ, 26th Reserve Division, 27th June

‘Sector Thiépval North is to be reinforced as necessary. If the enemy gets established there, he is to be ejected at once. Further elements of 1st Battalion Bavarian Reserve Infantry Regiment 8 can be made available to replace troops moved forward out of the intermediate or second position for this purpose.’

Sheldon, *The German Army on the Somme*, Pen & Sword 2005, p. 148

Operational guidance: Exerziersreglement 1906

‘War demands iron discipline and the exertion of every nerve. In particular, combat demands leaders who have been educated to think for themselves and men who will act autonomously... Fundamental to training is that what is essential is put before form... All training must be directed towards creating self-reliant leaders and men... There are no definite, universally valid rules of leadership. In every individual case a leader has to think through the most appropriate way of conducting operations and make a decision accordingly... Senior commanders must not issue orders which go beyond what they have to. They should on no account go into details and should leave the choice of means to their subordinates... The independence of junior leaders does not mean they can do as they please... The greatest quality of a leader remains a sense of responsibility.’

‘Every order must make clear the intention... subordinates have the right to expect orders that make the intentions of their leader clear. That enables them to act more consistently in line with his wishes, and if he becomes a casualty, to continue the fight in full knowledge of its purpose.’

Lt General Sir Thomas Morland



A personal view

'36th very successful, reaching Blue line and Schwaben Redoubt, 32nd do not get on so well. In evening situation very uncertain – but 36th have nearly all ground gained – 32nd hold part of German second & support line. Over 500 prisoners taken – 36th lose 150 officers & 4,600 men. Get good view from Engelbelmer tree in afternoon.'

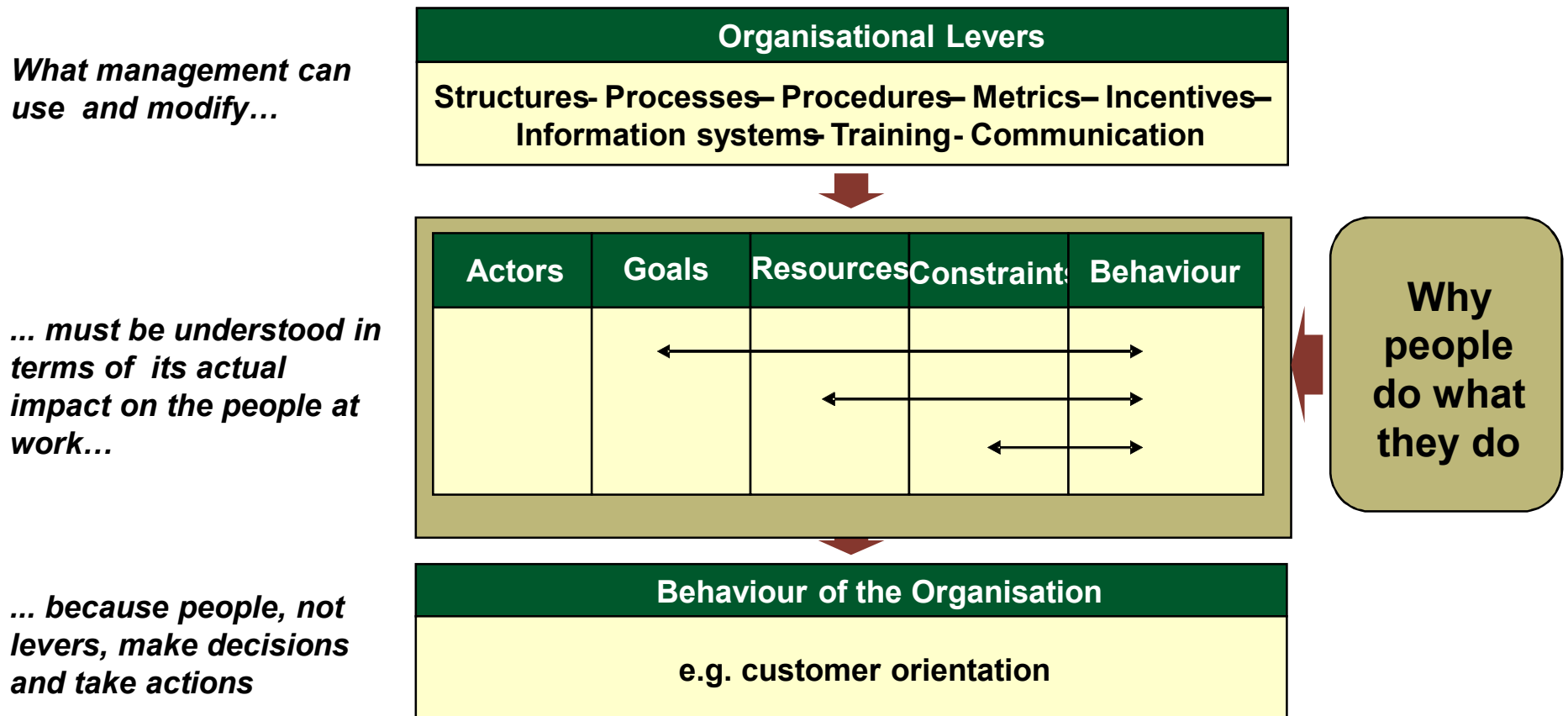
Sir Thomas Morland personal diary, 1st July 1916

'The battle still rages – there is a lull in one part. I am sorry to say my Corps has made little progress and has lost very heavily. The Ulster Div. did magnificently to start with but got driven back later.

On the whole things have been going well and we have been very successful on the right... My people had a very hard task... Swift advances cannot be expected in this sort of warfare and I expect we shall go on for a long time like the Germans at Verdun.'

Sir Thomas Morland, letter to daughter, 4th July 1916

The individual as part of a human system



Source: The Boston Consulting Group, Discussion Paper

What drove Morland's behaviour?

Map of Organisational Dynamics

Actors	Goals	Resources	Constraints	Resulting behavior
Morland	Capture all objectives Maintain control	18 battalions in reserve Corps artillery	Inexperience of troops Lack of information Communications Difficult to change fire plan	Order officers to stay in their HQ's to facilitate upwards communication Stick to the plan

Oberstleutnant von Bram



**Von Bram being presented to King Ludwig III of Bavaria on 10th January 1916.
Behind von Bram is Hauptmann Wurmb who took over command of 3rd Battalion
on 1st July 1916**

What drove German officers' behaviour?

Map of Organisational Dynamics

Actors	Goals	Resources	Constraints	Resulting behavior
Von Soden, von Auwärter, von Bram, Prager, Beyerköhler, Roesch, Wurmb, Lunau*	Repulse all incursions Maintain control of critical positions	14 companies in reserve Divisional artillery Expectation of mutual support Shared intent	Difficulty of movement Time	Make rapid decisions 'Strain every nerve' to re-take Schwaben Redoubt

* Ranks range from Lt General to Acting Lieutenant (Sergeant Major)

3rd Perspective: Culture: 50 Years

Managing, leading and directing in the
British and Prussian/German Armies

Doctrine (inexplicit): the British Army

- “ Battle is chaotic so it must be controlled through firm management
- “ Battle is stressful, so troops must be tightly controlled
- “ Decision-making must be carried out by the senior officer who must therefore remain properly informed at all times
- “ Discipline means inculcating unquestioning obedience
- “ Men must be trained to act instinctively, without thinking
- “ More senior commanders generally know better
- “ Interfering with subordinate commanders is unduly restrictive

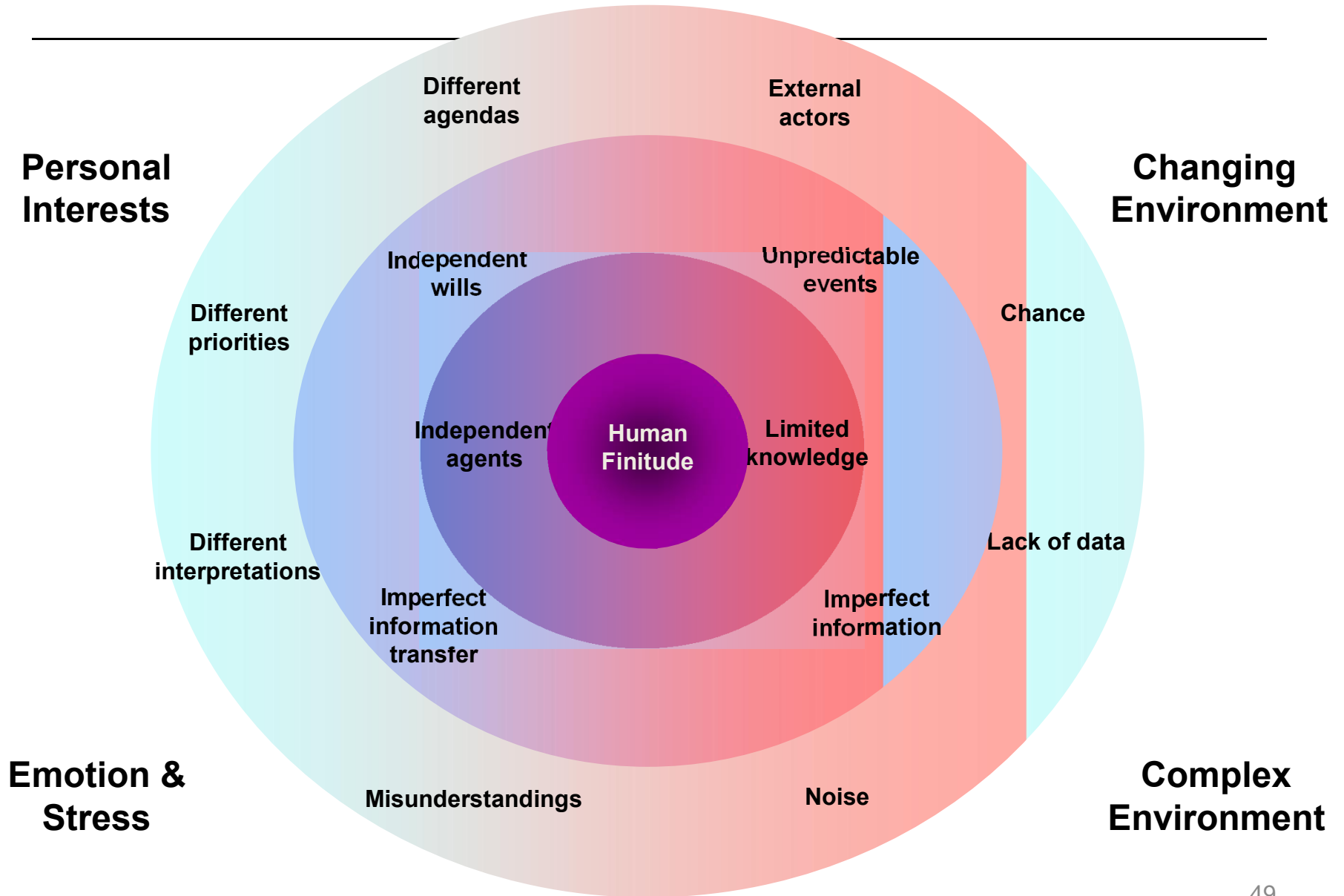
Doctrine (explicit): the Prussian/German Army

- “ Battle is chaotic so the chaos must be exploited through effective command (direction)
- “ Battle is stressful so troops need incisive leadership
- “ Decision-making must be rapid and carried out at all levels
- “ A good decision is ‘about right – now’
- “ Discipline means ‘autonomous thinking obedience’ in line with intent
- “ Men must be trained to think for themselves and be self-reliant
- “ The person with the best information knows best
- “ Subordinates must be granted freedom to choose the means of realising the commander’s intent

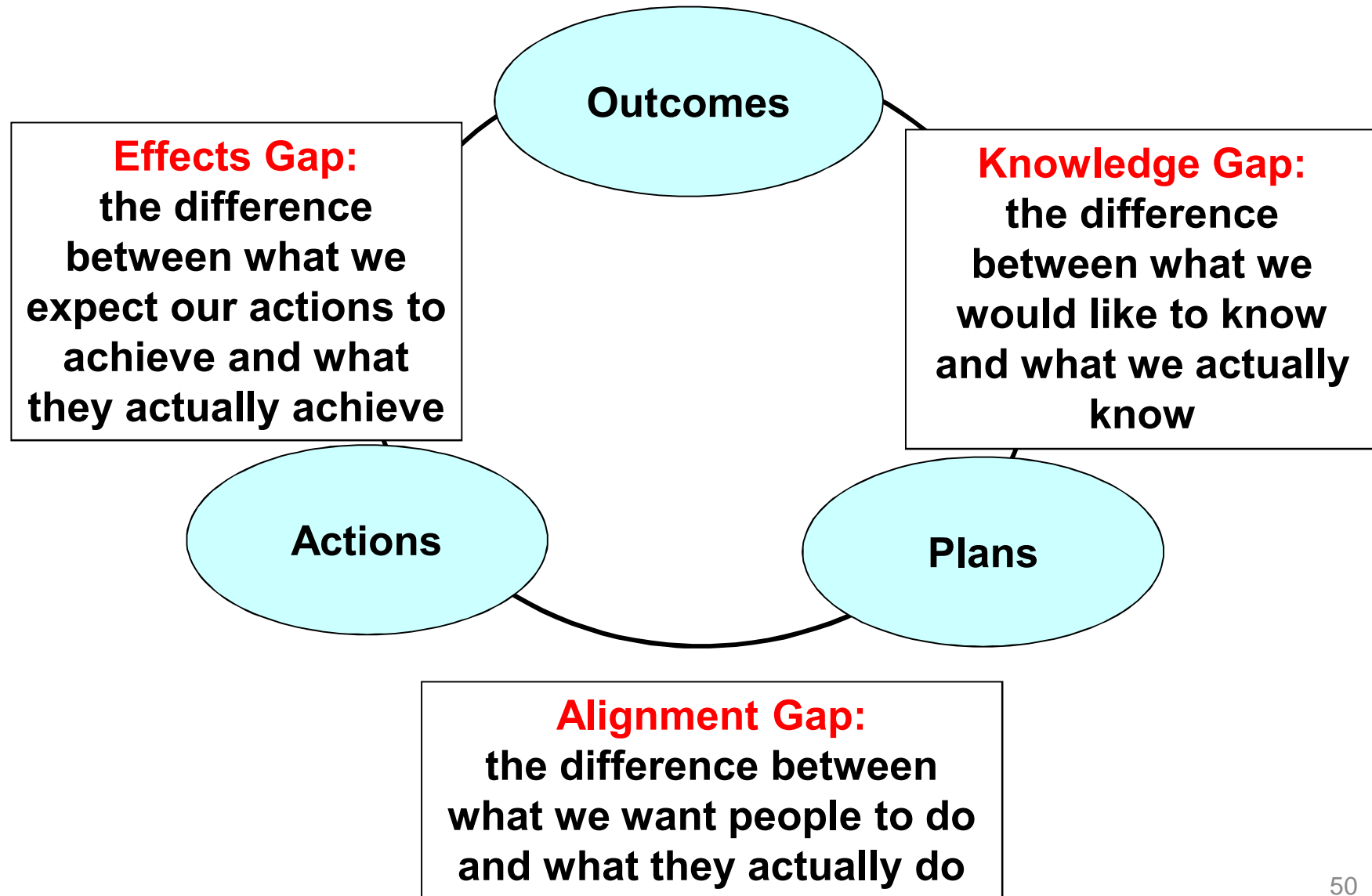
The theorist



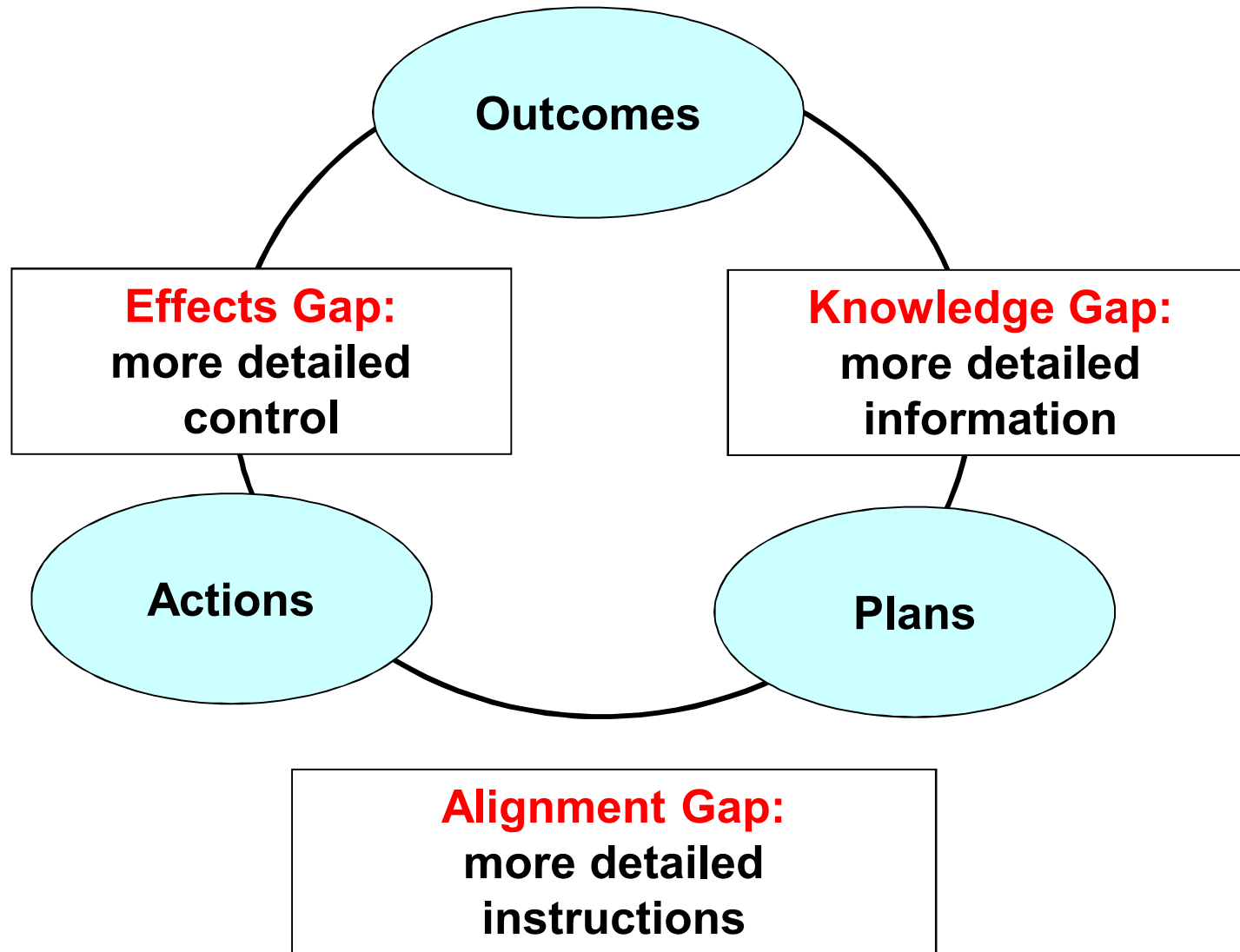
The overall concept of friction



The problem: three critical gaps



Usual reactions



Three mistakes

- “ Confusing understanding with information
- “ Confusing clarity with detail
- “ Confusing outcomes with measures

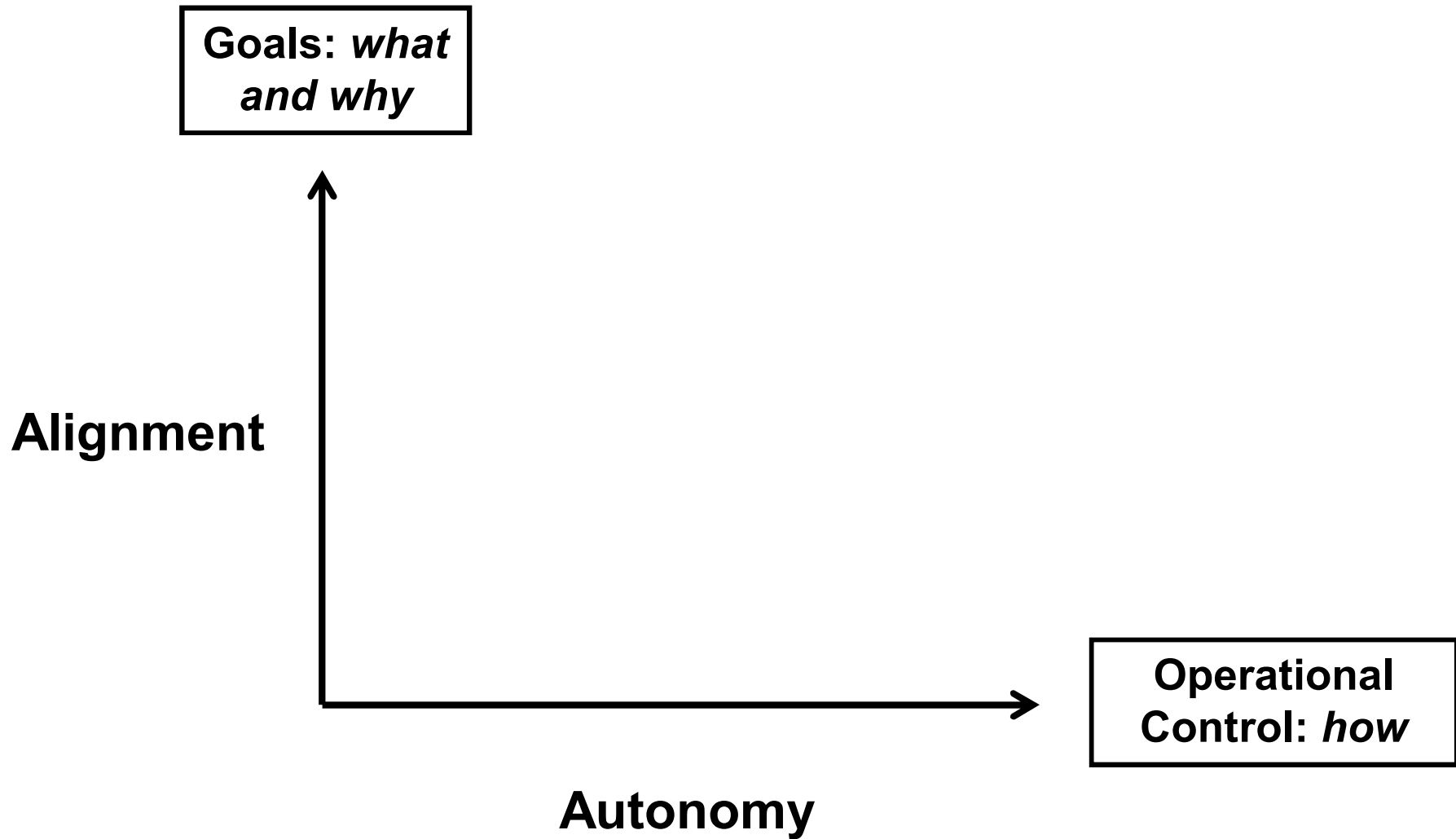
The original guru – and practitioner



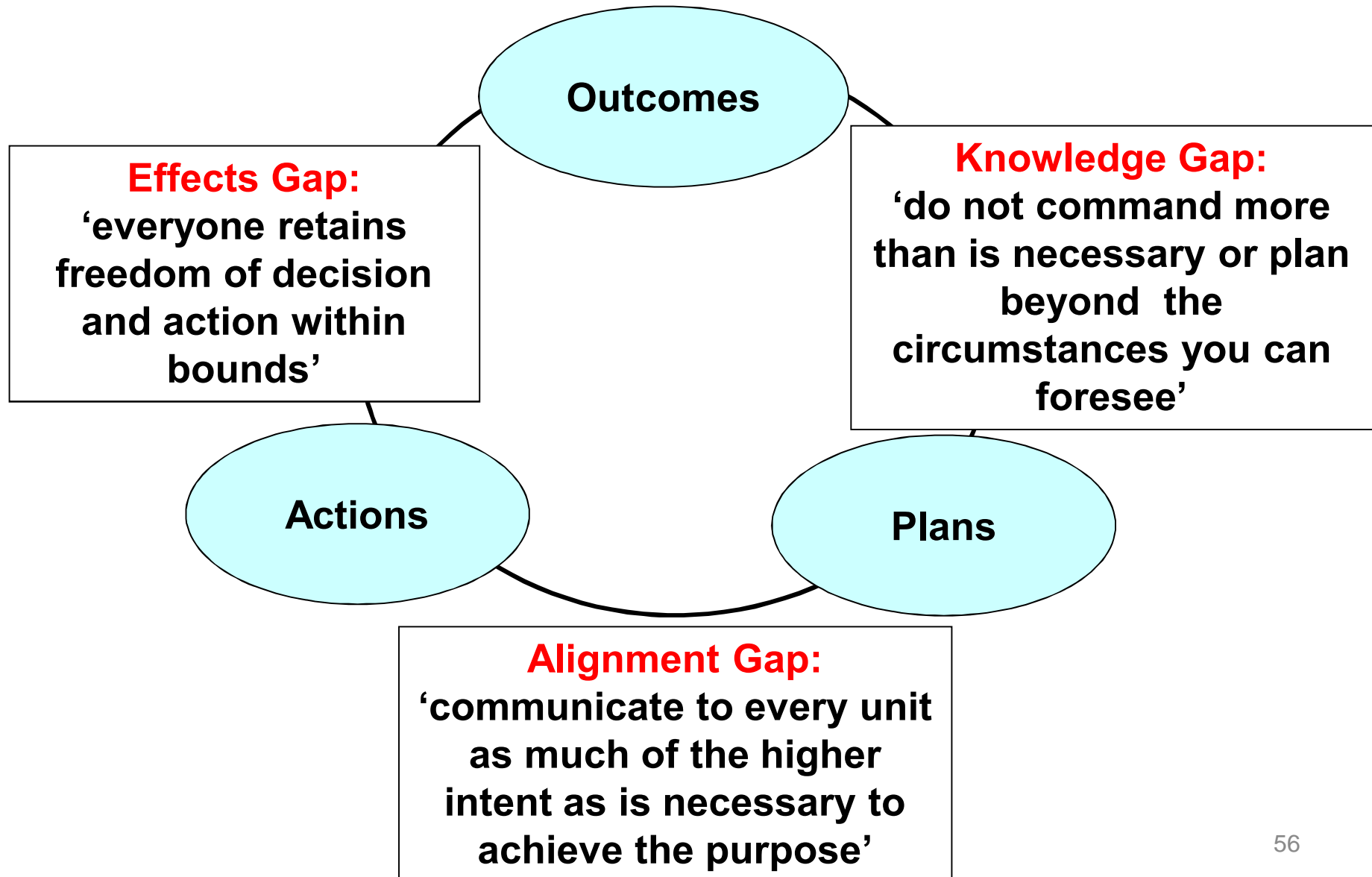
A choice?



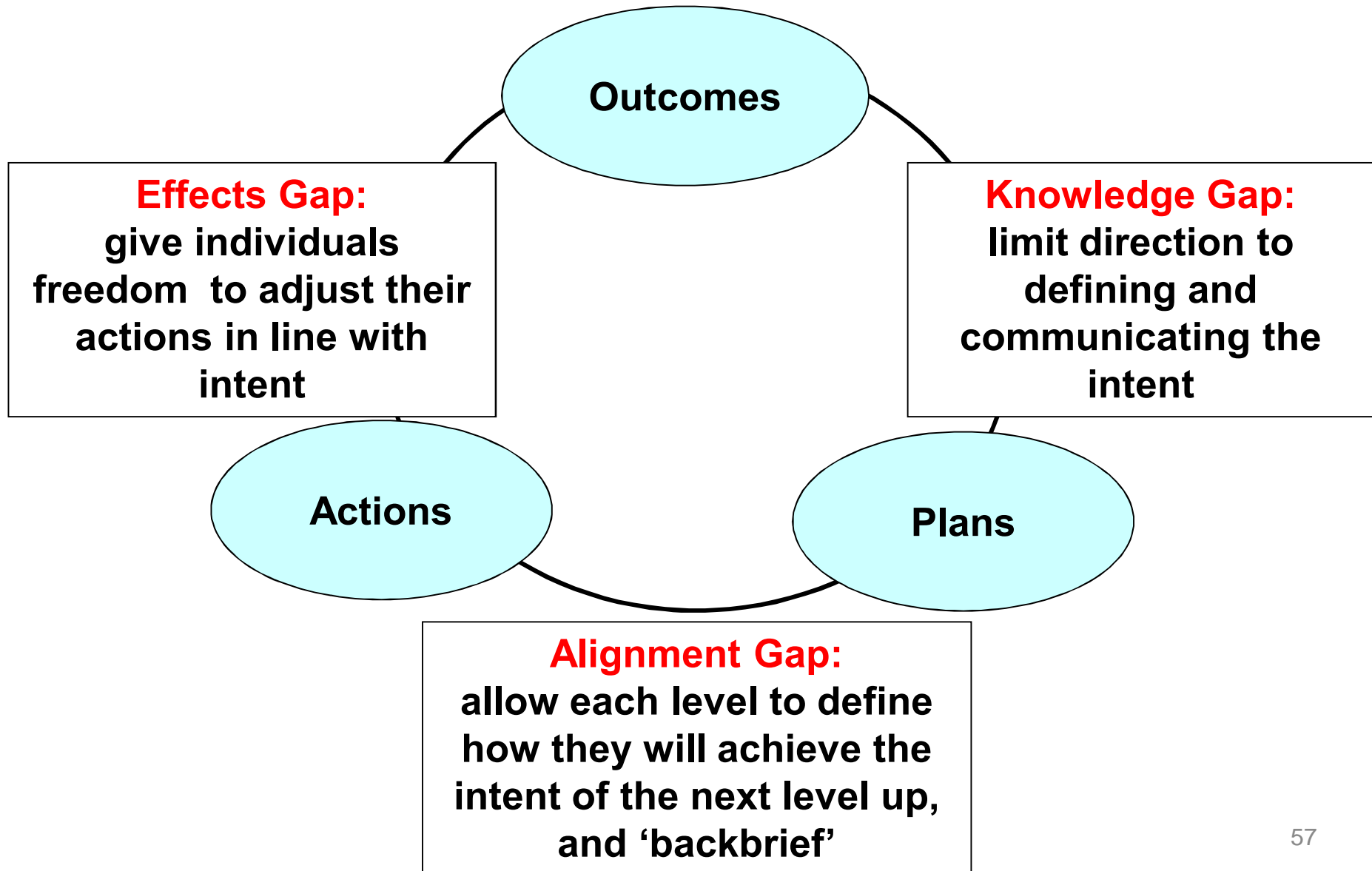
High alignment enables high autonomy



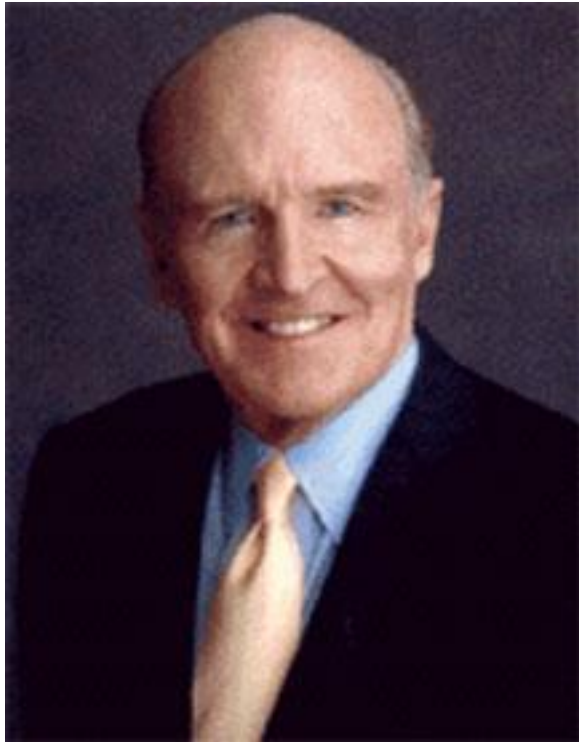
Von Moltke on the three gaps



The system of solutions



A follower of the guru – ‘planful opportunism’



‘The Prussian General Staff, under the elder von Moltke...did not expect a plan of operations to survive beyond the first contact with the enemy. They set only the broadest of objectives and emphasised seizing unforeseen opportunities as they arose... Strategy was not a lengthy action plan. It was the evolution of a central idea through continually changing circumstances.’

Jack Welch, *Jack*, p. 448

1. Addressing the knowledge gap: a demanding intellectual discipline

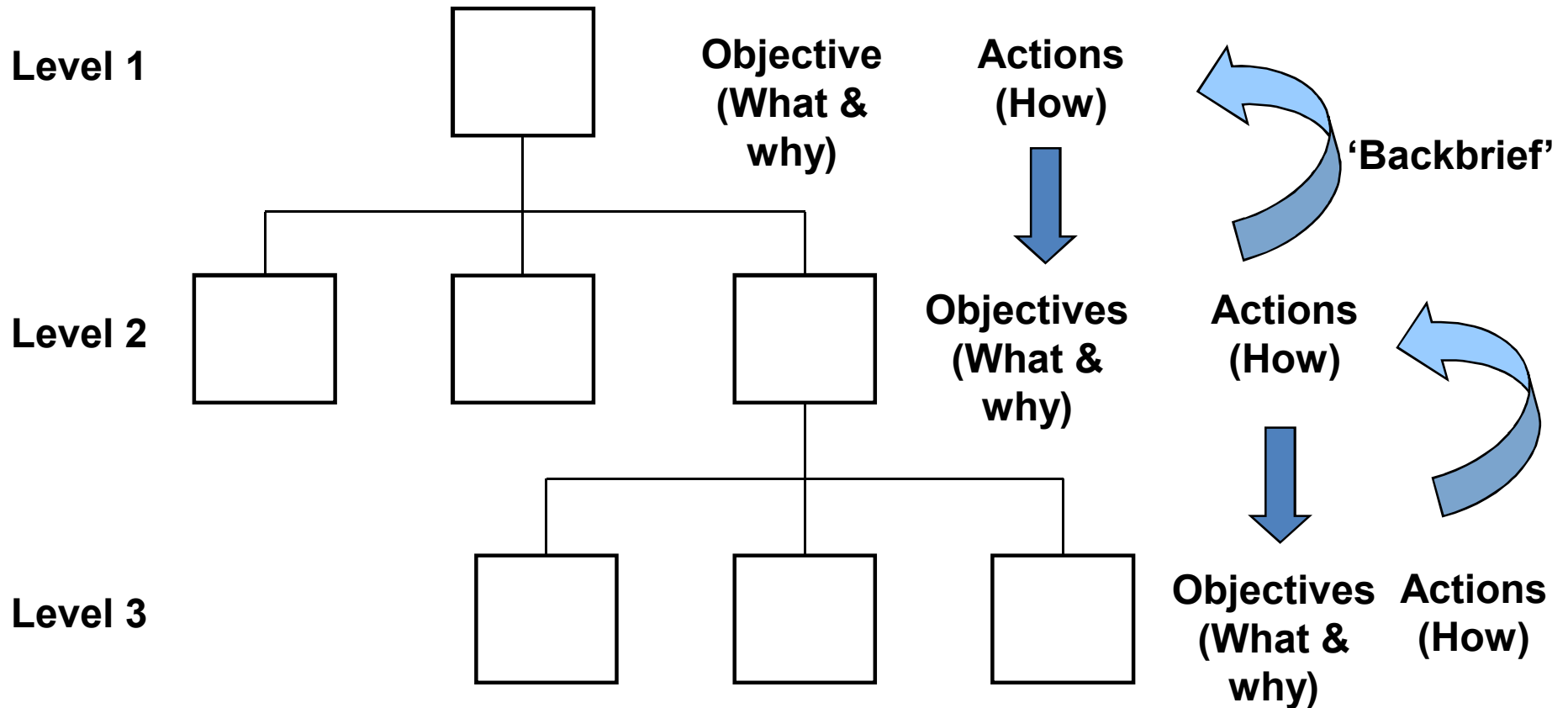
Tell me what you want – what you really, really want...



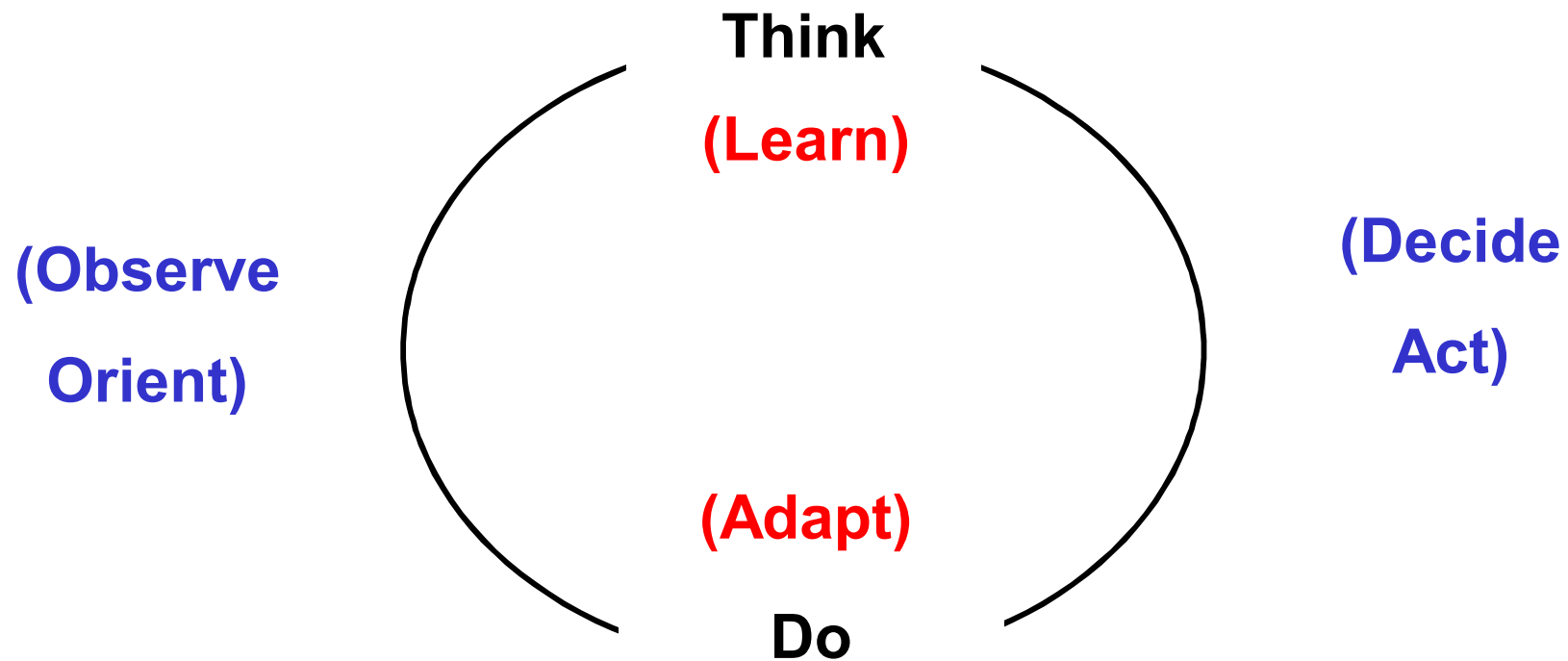
give me some resources, some constraints – and shut up!

2. Addressing the alignment gap: cascading intent

Strategic context

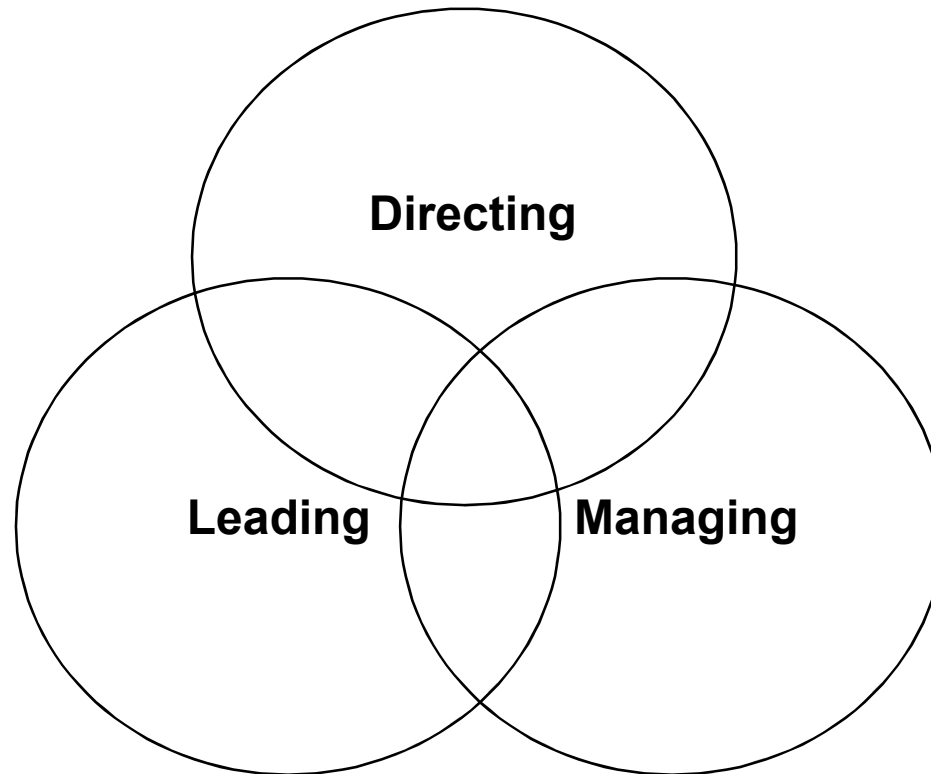


3. Addressing the effects gap: the organisation finds the path



Personal challenges

How do you set clear direction?



How do you lead while allowing others to do so?

How do you allocate resources efficiently and effectively?

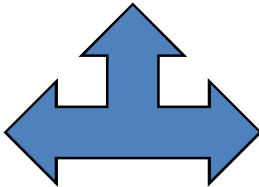
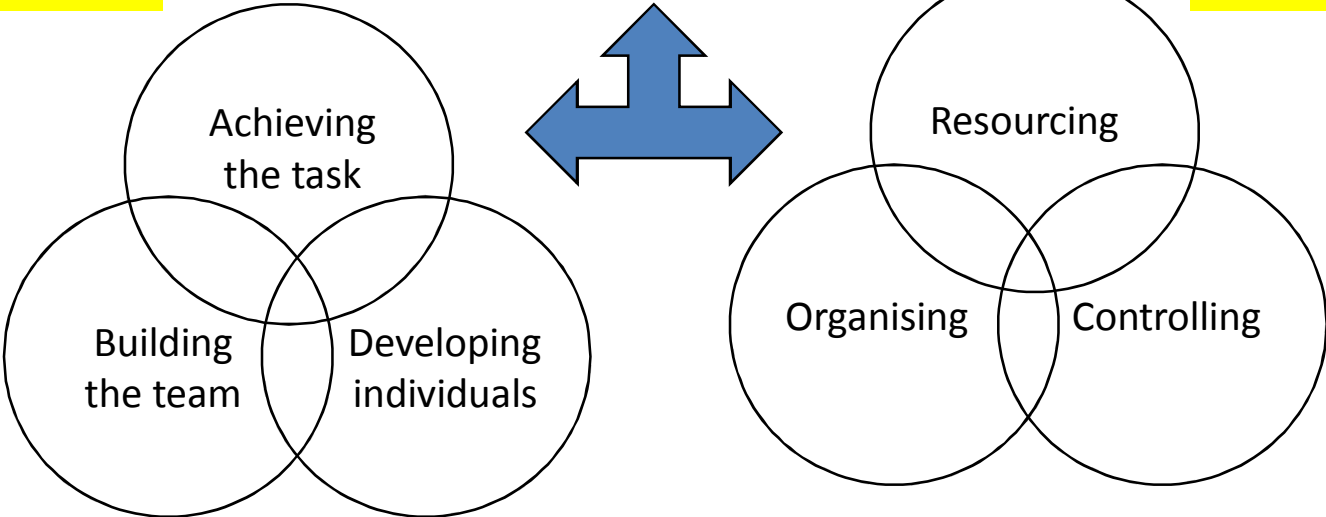
Different skills

Directing: Intellectual (conceptual)

**Leadership:
Human
(moral)**

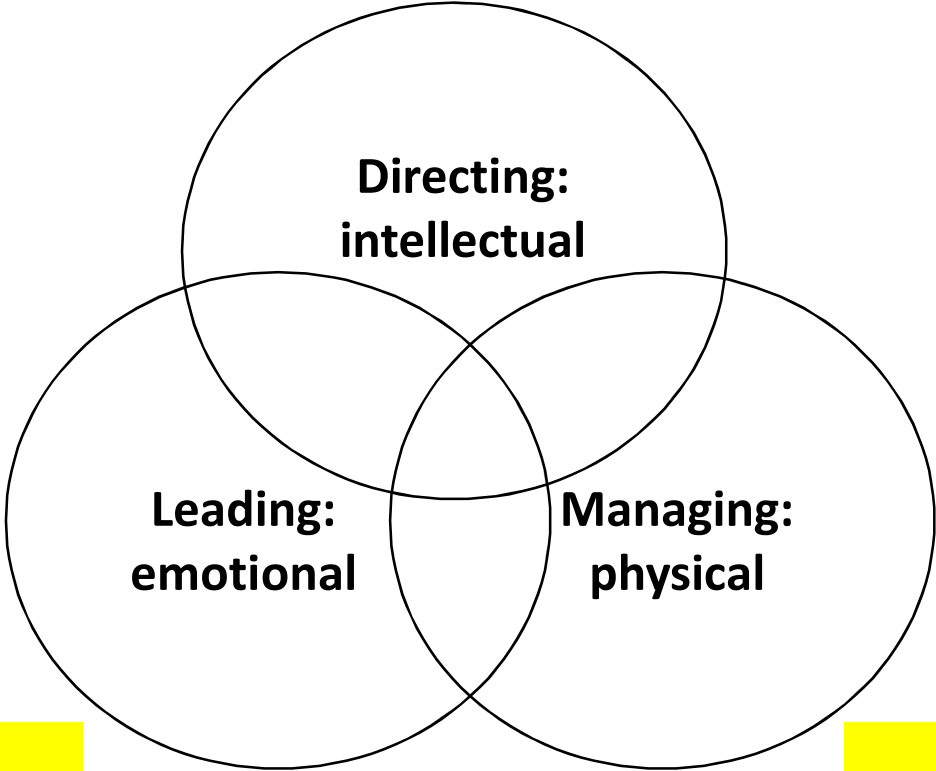


**Management:
Technical
(physical)**



Different mental attitudes

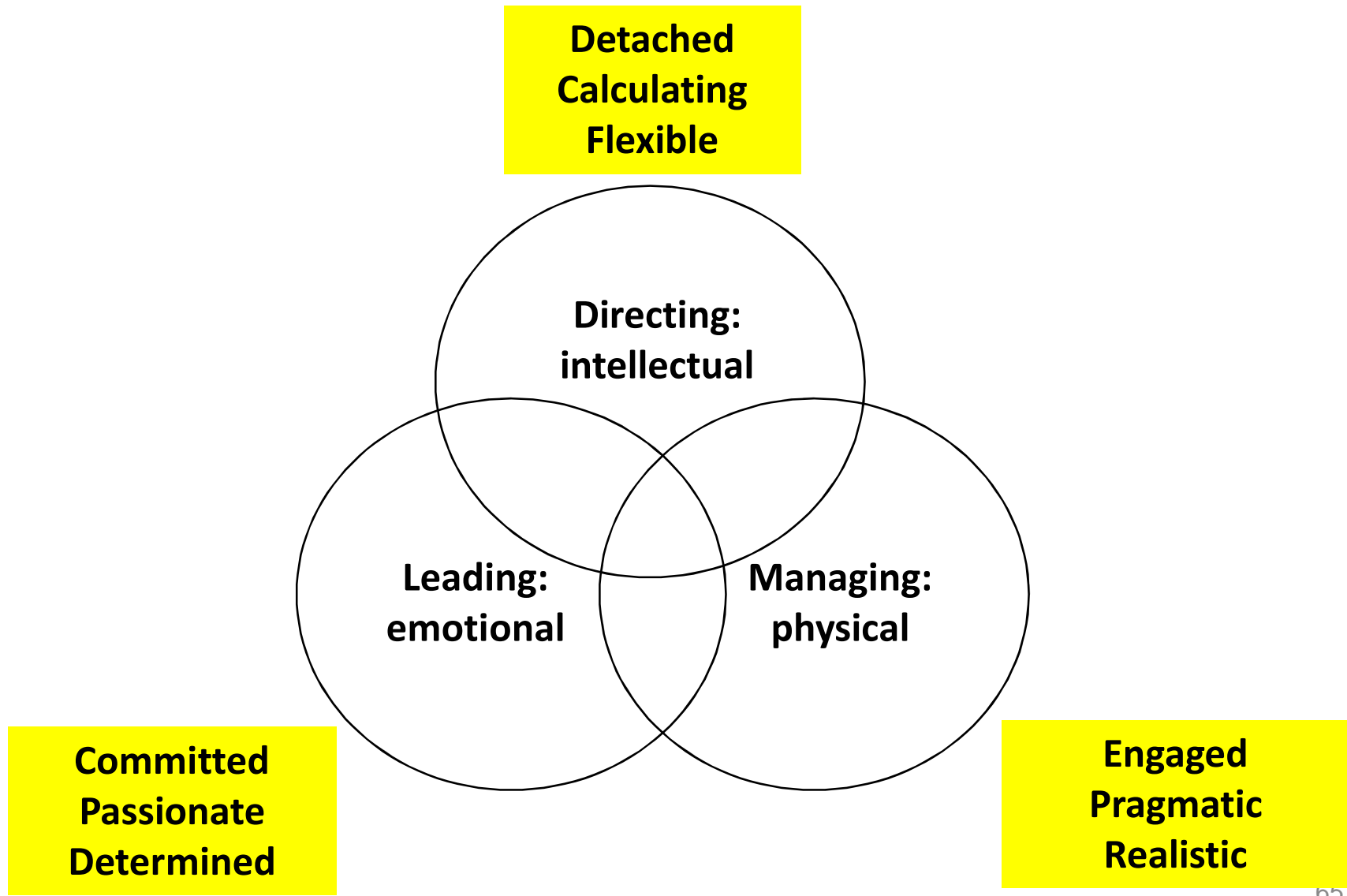
**Probing:
'What should we do?'**



**Positive:
'We can do it!'**

**Pragmatic:
'Let's get organised!'**

Requiring self awareness



Command or control?

‘Independent thinking obedience’

Intent = task + purpose

Intent + situation = decision

The paradox of empowerment

British

Plan specifies what to do:

...is detailed and unclear

...fails to make choices

...which cripples action

...and reduces power in the organisation

Morland keeps power to himself:

...so failing to influence events

... as higher units constrain lower ones

Germans

Doctrine specifies how to behave:

...intent is broad and clear

...makes tough choices

...which enables action

...and increases power in the organisation

Von Soden gives power away:

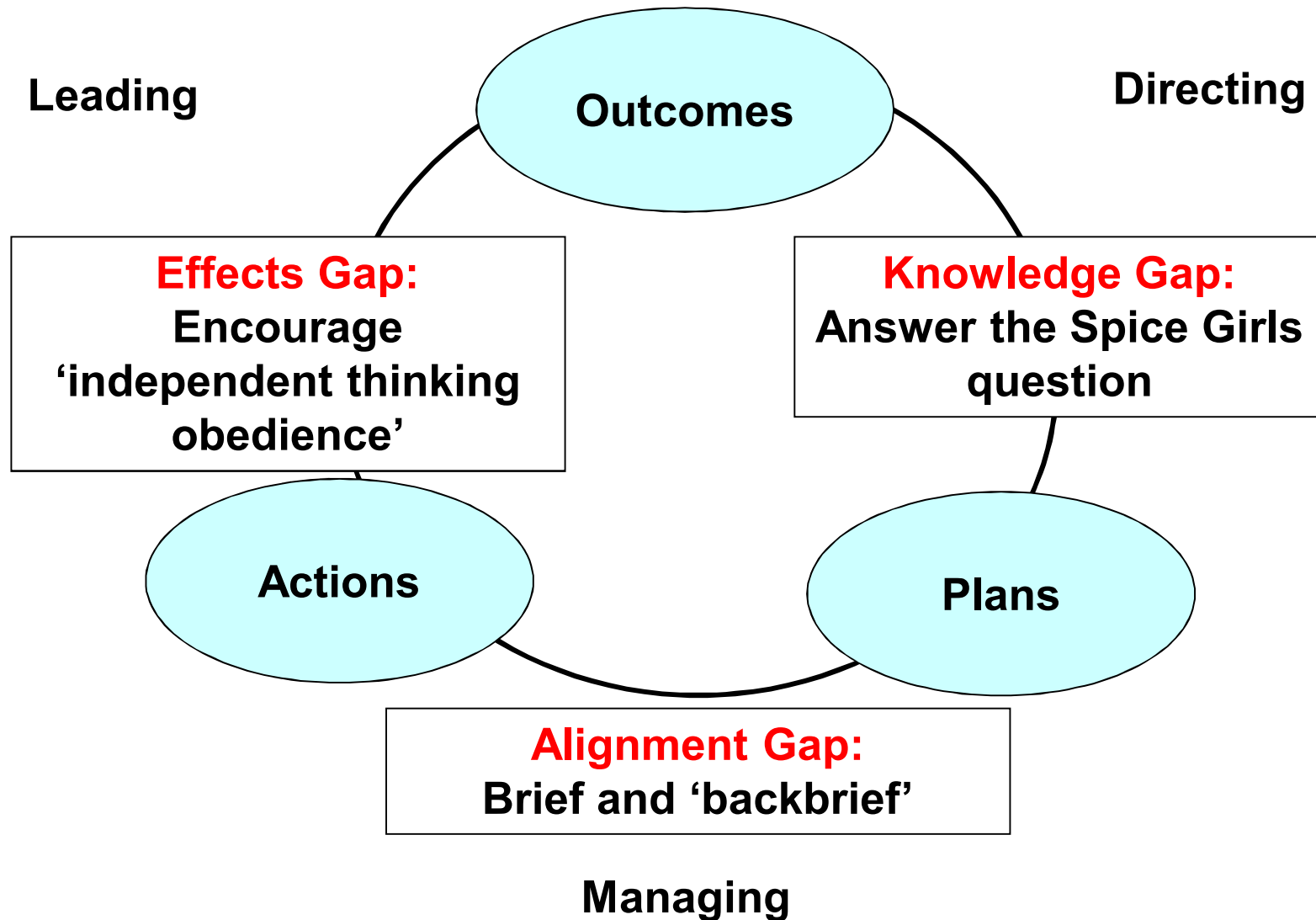
...so influencing events through others

...as higher units enable lower ones

The executive's trinity: propositions

- “ Managing, leading and directing are different
- “ Mastering all three is very rare
- “ Top teams need the combination
- “ An environment of friction requires clear strategic direction and incisive operational leadership
- “ When direction is effective, control can be light

Summary: directed opportunism



Postscript

Moltke: address to the Reichstag, 14th May 1890

‘Gentlemen, if war, which has now been hovering over our heads like the sword of Damocles for over ten years, if this war breaks out, its duration and outcome cannot be foreseen. It is the greatest powers of Europe, armed as never before, which are going into battle against each other; none of them can be brought down in one or two campaigns...gentlemen, it could be a seven year, it could be a thirty year war - and woe betide him who first throws a lighted match into the powder keg!

...Gentlemen, every Government in every land is confronted by challenges of the greatest social importance, questions which war can delay but never resolve...the mass of the population in every country wants peace, but only the parties placed at their head have the power to decide the matter.

...Gentlemen, the peaceful assurances of our neighbours to East and West are certainly valuable...but we can only find security in ourselves.’

'Viel leisten, wenig hervortreten, mehr sein als scheinen'



(‘Work hard, avoid the limelight, be more than you seem’)