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How We Think: Thinking Critically and Creatively and How Military Professionals Can Do It Better

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HOW WE THINK: THINKING CRITICALLY AND CREATIVELY AND HOW MILITARY PROFESSIONALS CAN DO IT BETTER

Articles

Fri, 09/16/2011 - 10:22am

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Sometimes in the course of military operations ill-conceived ideas survive to produce unacceptable outcomes. When this happens, frustrated leaders might ask, "What made us think this would work?" The last decade of persistent conflict has made this a common experience especially when we face problems that are unique. Why would this be the case?

Military professionals prefer thinking that is rational and analytical, and which helps in the selection of ideas that meet feasibility, acceptability, and suitability criterion. In addition, they prefer to select rational and analytical ideas that have a history of working in similar situations as before. This creates a "paradigmatic" mode of typical thinking, which is the opposite of deep, reflective, multi-perspective thinking. This "field expedient" means of just enough thinking to find usual solutions has been so successful, through trial and error, that it takes a deliberate act of will to do original thinking that may take practitioners out of their professional paradigm. It has been so successful that there is great pressure among practitioners to keep doing it precisely because it has been a good way to solve problems that fit within the accepted paradigm of the military profession. In fact, it has made those kinds of problems so "solvable" that we are increasingly only left with the kinds of hard problems that our paradigmatic thinking is not well suited to handle. However, it is not the paradigmatic way of thinking that is "faulty," but rather that when we try to apply it outside of the appropriate context, it begins failing us. The fault is not in the mode of thinking but in its improper application to certain contexts. These contexts are the medium to ill structured problems that FM 5-0 introduces to the profession.

To meet these types of problems, the military profession is expanding its thinking repertoire to include concepts such as "Design", in order to allow its critical and creative thinking to account for problems that fall outside of the assumed context of the military operating parameters. Professional military education institutions have furthered this effort by turning to theorists who have labeled the mental activities of critical and creative thinking. Several military professional practitioners have described a practical explanation of the same type of activities.

This essay will summarize how cognitive theorists have described critical and creative thinking in general, and how some military practitioners have applied them. In doing so, this essay will propose principles of critical and creative thinking applicable to the military profession to provide a common vocabulary that describes the type of thinking we do. To expand and improve critical and creative thinking, military professionals need a common vocabulary that accurately describes the very thinking we are to expand and improve on. Below is a synopsis of how a sampling of theorists and military practitioners describe the mental activities associated with critical and creative thinking.

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Comments

student

Thu, 11/29/2012 - 11:19am

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(/comment/37533#comment-37533)

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the first military professionals or power structures of society are obliged to protect society. Because not everybody thinks rationally, but each requires recognition of the society of his or her identity. The story you want to analyze, but the one who has eyes to see the present situation as a result of progress (or regress) of each country

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The Pap

Mon, 05/07/2012 - 1:52pm

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(/comment/34405#comment-34405)

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I am not fond of the distinction between systematic and systemic (as Hubba Bubba suggests). They both subscribe to thinking the world (and its messes) out there as a system and composed of subsystems (some more complex than others). This is a paradigm in- and of- itself.

It may be that the systems paradigm is THE issue with our thinking.

"We need not certainly presuppose that the world somehow is systematic (simple, uniform, and the like) to validate our penchant for the systematicity of our cognitive commitments."

--Nicholas Rescher

I'll go with Rescher on this point. We need to reread Rittel and Webber (i.e. 10 characteristics)! We have forgotten what wickedness means :)

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Bill M.

Sat, 09/17/2011 - 5:18pm

(/comment/30414#comment-30414)

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I agree with most of Hubba Bubba's points below, and while we should continuously endeavor to improve our ability to think creatively and critically this article appears to be largely a rational argument for continuing the current methodology, but focus on improving the individual planner, with the unstated assumption that is we have creative and critical thinkers conducting the planning the process will work. It may be improved incrementally, but the process is still largely similar to an algorithm and the input will be transformed into standardized results regardless of the level of creative thinking based on the military's strong desire to embrace formats (which limit creative thinking and solutions) and employ all capabilities whether needed or not because good plans are joint and incorporate X, Y, and Z (according to our culture).

Our planning processes are probably adequate for planning military operations that are focused on threats, but they are from ideal when we're focused on "attacking" ideas, economic assistance, building local and national governments, etc. At the end of the day you still have military officers in the planning group that are not experts in these areas that are attempting to make these activities conform to our doctrinal processes. Occasionally we have the time and are humble enough to invite functional experts into our planning groups, but they're frequently frustrated with our inability to grasp and implement their ideas when we distort their ideas (sometimes even give them military buzz word definitions) by attempting to adapt them into our preconceived phases of an operation.

The author's recommendations may make us "better" planners, but they won't change the paradigmatic thinking rut we're stuck in.

While design is designed (pardon the pun) to help us understand the context and identify the real problems (as Einstein stated we should spend 90% of our time defining the problem, 10% solving it), I have yet to see it work in reality. It is simply an intellectual exercise that largely separate from the planning process, and all too frequently conducted by a limited number officers with strong biases or strong prepositions.

Additionally, all too often when each of us talk about improving our strategic and operational level planning processes (for other than combat, because our processes work fairly well for what they were designed for) it means people should do the world the way I do. They should adopt my philosophy on life, my approach to problems, etc.

Then of course if you are actually successful with developing a creative plan that is outside the norm (not just using new buzz words to try to sound like your approach is different), you have the challenge of selling it through multiple layers of bureaucracy manned by dinosaurs (often young dinosaurs stuck in a doctrinal rut and uncomfortable with anything that doesn't adapt to their formats and processes) that can step on the brakes.

From a frustrated planner.

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Hubba Bubba

Sat, 09/17/2011 - 8:22am

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(/comment/30411#comment-30411)

(/comment/30411#comment-30411)

Just a few thoughts-

Critical thinking and creative thinking require more than adherence to military doctrine, and the references to FM 5-0 as well as the many mechanistic and post-positivist procedures in this article reflect a very systematic rather than systemic appreciation for military conceptual planning and 'problem solving.'

Critical thinking evokes the concept of 'problematization' as espoused by Michel Foucault and represents the post-modern philosophical/organizational theory application to conceptual planning and problem-solving. To critically think requires one to challenge the institution, to include core values, and to 'think about thinking'- some use the term 'metacognition.' However, military planners and leaders that actually employ critical thinking will find many of the design references of this article quite constrictive, conformist, and lacking in appreciation of complex adaptive systems logic.

1. Army Design Methodology (in its current form) reflects further 'group think' that attempts in a reductionist, or post-positivist manner to categorize thinking into a procedure. Step one- establish the environmental frame...step two..and so-forth. Doctrine codifies- it protects select narratives that are self-relevant to an institution; that is potentially why the military and some religious institutions (both defined by tradition, conformity, and the requirements for universalization and repetition of select behaviors and practices) use the term 'doctrine' in the first place. Doctrine is mostly about preservation of control- and the process of not thinking but following guidance to act.

2. Dr. Kem's work is largely in Operational Design, not Design. His short book referenced here (footnote 4) is actually a book on Operational Design which should not be confused with Design- or conceptual planning, or ADM, or Adaptive Campaigning, or any of the other hybrid terms out there for making sense of complex adaptive systems. Kem masterfully explained important concepts that are rooted in Effects-Based Operations (EBO)- which Joint Operations, the USAF, and the USMC tend to gravitate towards (pun intended) due to the cognitive maps (Dr. Reilly's contribution based largely upon Kem and Strange's work) where reverse engineering of strategic end-states link to centers of gravity, with lines of operation emerging from those back to the present state. This is, of course, my personal opinion based on Kem's work and interaction with him- I respect his position but disagree.

ree that Kem's work is the right material for any article on Design to cite, unless one is producing a paper that espouses the institutional position that the current doctrine "got it right." This strikes me more as a conformist or group-think position instead of a critical one. Instead of Kem's work, the authors might consider some actual critical thinkers- not limited to:

Ludwig von Bertalanffy, Valerie and Allen Ahl, Ervin Laszlo, Huba Wass de Czege, Francois Jullien, Michel Foucault, Peter Novick, Jeff Conklin, Gwilym Jenkins, Shimon Naveh, Gerald Weinberg, Nassim Taleb, Vladimir Slipchenko, Alex Ryan, Paul Ricoeur, Thomas Nelson, Thomas Kuhn, Steven Johnson, Anne-Marie Grisogono, Gilles Deleuze, Felix Guattari, Peter Checkland, Walter Buckley, Eva Boxenbaum, Linda Rouleau, Mats Alvesson, Jorgen Sandberg, among others. There are just so many out there- and most of them have nothing to do with the military- which has everything to do with why we keep attempting to solve complex problems the wrong way!

3. Figure 1 in this article makes the point that Army Design Methodology relies extensively on science, procedures, and rigid decision making trapped within a hierarchical structure that does not take well to critical or creative thinking. The Army Problem-solving Model's highly problematic logic begins with "identify the problem" which leads right into a systematizing and positivist logic where every problem identified automatically comes with an associated solution. Instead of problem-centric thinking, we ought to consider appreciating the complex system holistically- seeking patterns and emergence. Solving one problem likely creates three more..

4. Figure 1 also includes Mission Command (which many general officers still question whether it is much different from Battle Command...or more useful); and to my dread, also includes the utterly worthless graphic from FM 5-0 with the Design Methodology fishing net of nothingness. In terms of graphics, figure 1 for this article is less about explaining anything in the article, and more about showing the reader a smorgasbord of conforming and "group think" planning graphics collected from across the Army doctrine. These are procedures, and are generally quite rigid. That is likely why the military struggles to bridge conceptual to detailed planning- complex systems do not behave or respond well to these controlling methodologies that seek to "tame" wicked problems, as Conklin would argue.

5. By the time I got to figure 2, the overarching narrative of this article was clear. Instead of discussing critical and creative thinking across a holistic perspective that draws from outside the military approved and sanctioned "Design" field, this article showcases only approved ideas. Doctrine is good, and sanctioned military thinkers are good. This is hardly critical- and largely unhelpful for military planners attempting to explain or understand how to better plan under complex conditions. To think critically is to go beyond touting the party line, whether that line is directed by Washington, the Pentagon, Leavenworth, or even within CGSC or SAMS. We must break beyond the group-think of doctrine, question why we think the way we do- why we prefer to see the world and attempt to explain it in certain ways while ignoring or rejecting other perspectives. To be creative, one must go well outside of the box and not look for procedures, check-lists, or pretty graphics that are universal in nature and expect the reader to think less, and follow the procedure more. Planning is not about coloring within the lines- to think creatively and critically, turn the coloring book upside down and use the back of it- the blank paper- move away from the lines entirely- and begin from there instead....

Food for thought- my opinions are just my own.

Hubba Bubba

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