

Speaking Up and Listening Down the Chain of Command

It's POA time in the pharmaceutical industry. These thoughts on the politics of providing information to decision makers are highly relevant. Brand teams, market analysts and senior decision makers should all be aware of the pitfalls of organizational decision making.

Intel Plus 'Group Think' Equaled Weapons Of Mass Destruction In Iraq — By John J. Hamre

As I reflect on my time as the deputy secretary of Defense, I am often reminded of how isolated I was in that position. I had a fabulous staff. I was never denied anything I requested.

Organizations and individuals actively sought to get on my calendar to tell me of their work.

Having said that, anyone who serves in these positions is very isolated. This is a product of several factors.

First, the volume of material that comes to the secretary or deputy secretary is enormous. It has to be channeled for efficiency. Someone who works for you is deciding if you need to see it and when you need to see it. This is not a bad thing. This is just a fact of life. Second, everyone who meets with you or sends you a piece of paper is trying to create a positive impression. This means that subconsciously, and even consciously, everyone who briefs you wants to be seen in the best light. Before they walk in the door, they ask their colleagues and themselves, "What is he interested in? What sets him off? How do we discuss this so as to get a constructive outcome from the meeting?"

I found that I had to be careful not to distort the intelligence I received by the ways I asked questions and reacted to information. If I reacted harshly when

presented with bad news, future meetings could be tempered with overly optimistic perspectives. If I expressed interest in one subject, the briefer would take note and that aspect of a problem was always emphasized in future briefings. I do not believe it is intentional, but the information you get is affected by the attitude you adopt. I don't know that this shapes analysis, but it does affect the way it is presented to you.

Another observation I would make concerns what philosophers call epistemological questions:

How do we know what we know, and how good is the information that comprises this knowledge? Is it reliable? Is it true? This is the core of the intelligence community's problem.

The intelligence analyst is always working with fragmentary information. The question is a fragment of what? Is it a key fact that unlocks an understanding of a development, or is it unrelated to the hypothesis under consideration?

In relationship to this quest for certainty, I noticed that fragments of information gained greater certainty the farther away they were from the intelligence professional. The intelligence analyst is usually careful to note the reliability and timeliness of the intelligence "fact," but the qualifiers are often summarized and

dropped as the intelligence briefing moves up the decision-making ladder. Alternative hypotheses are often omitted. A data element of questionable reliability can gain credibility as it rises through the intelligence hierarchy until it becomes authoritative evidence. This does not mean the intelligence fact was wrong. It does mean there is a tendency to bestow greater credibility to the data the more removed it becomes from the intelligence professional.

I also noticed that once a general proposition was accepted as valid, it was usually repeated without question in subsequent analyses. Group consciousness develops in the intelligence and policy world when basic propositions are accepted as true. As we saw recently, the entire intelligence community and the policy community-and I include myself here-were convinced we would find major stocks of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) in Iraq. We have not. This demonstrates that a group consciousness, and the failure to adequately explore alternative hypotheses, can overcome the intelligence and policy world in the quest for certainty in what is inherently an uncertain enterprise.

In light of these phenomena, what should we do? How do we insulate ourselves from the problems that we confront as a consequence of these factors? One of the most important ways is to ensure competition among analysts. To accomplish this, we need redundant analytic capabilities in our intelligence community. We need competing organizations that report to different bosses in the federal government so we profit from the competition that is inherent in bureaucratic politics. This will not ensure that no mistakes will be made-witness the errors we made concerning WMD in Iraq. But, it is one of the important steps we can take to bring as much dispassionate analysis as possible to inherently uncertain questions.

Second, to counter the instinct toward "group think," we must augment the intelligence process through so-

called open-source methods. We must, of course, have classified research. But, I believe open-source methods serve to broaden the perspectives of those who work within the confines of classification. The intellectual community advances through open competition of ideas. Analysts in the intelligence community need to interact with the wider ideas community, and the only feasible way to do that is for the intelligence community to create open-source disciplines to parallel classified work.

Third, all of us in the policy community have to realize we do shape the quality of ideas that come to us from the intelligence community by the way we interact with that group. This is not to say we should be passive consumers of intelligence product. Far from it. Intelligence analysts need to be asked to explicitly discuss the quality and depth of data that underlie their analysis.

They should be explicit in identifying gaps and contra-proofs of their reasoning. These elements of introspection should be explicit annotations to the reports themselves, so policymakers are aware of analysts' constraints.

The years that lie ahead for America will be very challenging, and we will be very dependent on a healthy and vibrant intelligence community to chart these dangerous waters. We must take appropriate steps to ensure that this community remains healthy and vibrant.

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