

It's About Time

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Time is an important resource in decision making, especially under conditions of greater global interconnectedness of events, the increased ambiguity associated with them, and the uncertainty of the post-Sept. 11, 2001, environment. Indeed, time has been a critical resource in planning and operations in all peacetime and wartime experiences, but we tend to pay particular attention to time

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in situations when our foe or competitor can dictate the timing of events. Of course, we would rather have time on our side!

This article proposes that those in the defense community have a wider comprehension of time than just clocks and calendars offer. Defense professionals have multiple conceptions of time—all being uniquely useful. Those who serve in or for the military are socialized into other interpretations of time that make their professional culture quite distinctive from that of other institutions. What follows describes these different perceptions of time: event time, time as trust, and time as symbolism.

Event Time

What some may not understand is that military campaigners do not often plan operations based on calendar or clock time; rather, they make plans based on event-time orientations, where conditions, not clocks, dictate whether to start a new phase of operations. There are some who perceive that military operations are unfolding “behind schedule,” but that is a misleading perception when viewing operations from an event-time perspective.

Based on degrees of uncertainty and environmental complexity, there are two forms of event time. One is based on planning with a contingent view of time based on expected outcomes of our decisions and actions, called conditional

time. In that situation, we know conditions can be shaped relatively soon, but are uncertain exactly, by clock or calendar, when those conditions will exist. Nevertheless, we anticipate what actions we will execute when those conditions prevail. Defense planners are responsible for analyzing such conditions and predicting what should happen when/if they occur.

The second kind of event time is orientation time, when planners can somewhat orient toward a vision of the future but are uncertain about the complexities of achieving that vision—which, by the way, may have to change over time. Naval forces are adept at understanding this sense of time because they are often sent on deployments without a clear understanding of when and what they might have to do as they float around their assigned region. The exact time it takes to orient forces may vary, and changes to the plan can increase the time; however, the end result of the mission should always be the same: support the full range of military operations.

Applying the analogy to managing defense resources, defense professionals may have to reconsider the usefulness of calendar and conditional time orientations associated with the planning, programming, budgeting, and execution, or PPBE, process. For example, too much specificity beyond the future-years defense plan (what the planning stage of PPBE addresses) may be counterproductive and stifle innovation.

In more uncertain times, visions of the future are important, but the more complex the environment, the more purposefully ambiguous those stated visions should be as to orient in a general direction without being overly prescriptive.

Time as Trust

A critical factor in trustworthiness is time available to build relationships. Trust among peers has been a traditional value of the defense professional. The adage of “trust your buddy to protect your flank” serves holds true for many activities beyond conditions of combat. However, this social view of time is changing with increasing globalization and complexity of defense functions, and with the growing use of ad hoc teams formed as novel situations unfold. The adage may soon become “trust a stranger” because of the growing likelihood of never having met the fellow soldier, sailor, Marine, airman, or deployed civilian who now partially controls the warfighter’s destiny. Initial or swift trust of others becomes an important issue in the practice of management and organization development.

Work requirements that result from crises or some other time-critical need often result in stranger-based or swift-trust relationships in temporary teams or organizations. The need for swift trust applies to presidential commissions, Senate committees, construction contractors, film crews, theatrical companies, and certainly to defense and inter-agency ad hoc teams and task forces. For example, when state and local disaster relief activities are formulated on the fly, responders must often work together for the first time. Swift trust depends on a litany of variables that include reputation, conversation, health, safety, investments, hierarchical position, perceptions of adaptability, cognitive illusion of mastery, presumptions of trustworthiness, prospect of future interaction, and role clarity.

Time, as a dimension of trust, increases in importance as vulnerability (i.e., potential to harm) increases. With growing diversity in the workplace associated with gender, ethnic, race, and other cultures, the proposition grows that the healthy presence of trust contrasts sharply with betrayals of trust manifested through discrimination, indiscretion, unreliability, cheating, abuse, neglect, self-esteem, poor coordination, and poor anticipation. Time for team building, diversity training, and informal human relations activities takes on a whole new importance when taken in the context of building trustworthiness. Leaders should invest in social time during periods of relative calm to increase the chances for swift trust when a crisis or other short-fuse requirement hits.

Time as Symbolism

Members of the DoD community are keenly aware of symbolic rites that mark time, such as bugle calls, flag raisings and retreats, promotions, changes of command, and so on. Across the United States, not just those in DoD, bow their heads in anniversary of the “eleventh hour of the eleventh day of the eleventh month” and on every Sept. 11— numbers

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that represent time beyond the clock or a calendar date. Here clock and calendar time are subordinated to ceremonial senses—and that is an important part of DoD, be you serving or supporting.

Take the Army green “semi-dress” uniform jacket as an example of symbolic time. The jacket itself represents multiple time orientations. The jacket has brass buttons with the obverse side of Great Seal of the United States located on the four pockets and the front. The seal was designed in 1782 and symbolizes the founding of the nation. A shield on the American bald eagle breast has 13 vertical stripes symbolizing defense dating back in time to the original colonies. In the eagle’s right talon is an olive branch, and in its left a bundle of 13 arrows, demonstrating we operate in times of peace and war.

On the left sleeve of the Army uniform, the unit patch is sewn, signifying the member is assigned to that unit in present time. A patch sewn on the right sleeve is a symbol of past time—back to the unit to which the member was assigned or attached in combat. Both unit patches also serve as a reminder of unit history. For example, the “AA” (All American) patch of the 82nd Airborne Division was developed in World War I to symbolize the first Army division to be formed from soldiers from all over the United States, changing the previous paradigm of forming units from each state. Other Service uniforms have similar symbolic significance toward time.

Well, timing is everything, to include knowing when to stop writing an article. It is interesting that as you read this article, you are thinking in time with me, even though I wrote this article a while ago. Here again, neither the clock nor calendar are important in the sense of time because these ideas that I thought I typed up in the past may be freshly recognized today. I hope it was time well spent for you to read this article.

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