

The Story is Telling

Simplicity is Complicated

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Our bosses seem to want us to make things simpler—“Put this in simpler terms;” “Make the Microsoft® PowerPoint slide more readable;” “Put the bottom line upfront;” and “Write a one-page executive summary.” All things we’ve heard before. Interestingly, simplicity is still vaunted as one of the enduring principles of war; yet famous 18th century theorist Carl Von Clausewitz warned us that in war, the simplest things—like walking—sometimes cannot be performed well—like while walking in water. Why is making things simpler so difficult?

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Perhaps the “simple” answer is that simplicity is a cultural preference, not a universal goal. Contemporary philosopher Nicholas Rescher in his book *Philosophical Reasoning* captured this idea much more eloquently: “... simplicity is not an inevitable hallmark of truth ... but merely a methodological tool of inquiry. ... 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.” In other words, in the defense community, we believe that complexity is a temporary state of affairs that will become understandable when we can figure out a way to model it in a simpler way. Yet we tend to under-model a situation to the point where we lose the sense of complexity that we knew the situation merited. The fallacy of valuing simplicity is that it always under-appreciates reality. So why do we persist?

Our Need for Analysis

One explanation is that our infatuation with simplicity evolved from our early 20th century infatuation with analysis, epitomized by the creator of “scientific management” Frederick Taylor and his ideological quest for the engineering of work. Analysis literally means to break up the whole into component parts and assume that by examining the simpler pieces, one can understand the whole. Taylor and his loyal followers theorized that all work can be broken up into simpler, measureable activities. When properly analyzed, those activities can be controlled to produce outputs more efficiently, and these methods can be scientifically replicated across all business and public enterprises. Taylorism (linked closely to the McNamara-era of defense managerialism) is very much alive in the Department of Defense today, exemplified by these artifacts:

- The influence of the operations research and systems analysis community
- The wide use of operations research and systems analysis-style decision-making models (such as planning, programming, budget, and execution; joint operations planning process; and the Joint Capabilities Integration and Development System)
- The doctrinal analyses of the three levels of war (strategic, operational, and tactical)
- The publication of analytic products such as the Universal Joint Task List (a list of hundreds of “pre-engineered” tasks and standards of performance in military operations)
- The hierarchical training models that implement the Universal Joint Task List
- The use of scientific methods to produce joint concepts, experimentation, and technique
- Conceiving of the administration of war-making as a functional construct of doctrine, organization, training, materiel, leadership, personnel, and facilities
- Conceiving of joint operations as a functional construct of its components: command and control, intelligence, fires, movement and maneuver, protection, and sustainment.

(Note: For those readers interested in the history of Taylorism, Judith A. Merkle superbly documented the story in her 1980 book *Management and Ideology: The Legacy of the International Scientific Movement*.)

What should become apparent (and this is the central argument in this essay) is that we in DoD have a cultural propensity for simplification reinforced with an affection for analysis. Defense professionals may counter with, “Well, then, smart guy, if we don’t do analytics, what are we supposed to do?” The answer is not to throw away simplicity and analysis; rather, subordinate this simple-analytic paradigm to a broadened philosophy that widens the sense of being and considers other forms of knowledge creation, such as subjective-contextualization.

Subjective-Contextualization

The ontology of subjectivism sees man as a socially connected, communal being that exists only in the context of a society. Humans relate along the journey of life and create their worldview along the way; in other words, people socialize. In fact, to help the process of socialization along, they together invent and use words (i.e., create context) that begin with the letters “c” and “o.” Words like conflict, commune, consensus, communicate, combine, conversation, collective, cohort, community, coalition, collaborate, coordinate, cooperate, and coexist are important in describing a being in relation to others. Finding methods to make sense of the world is a group undertaking. Life’s strategies to communicate about the world and its complexities are richly descriptive and are often exemplified in fiction; histories; and other interpretive, liberal art forms. In this worldview, the logic of knowledge is not to seek scientific closure (as with analysis), but to continue the conversation to continuously reframe meaning (see the table on the following page).

The impact of this wider philosophical scope is to give us pause to contemplating the world at work only through the simple-analytic paradigm. The simplification-through-analysis prism can become a psychic prison in how we interpret events in the world. Wars reflect complex social issues, principally not scientific ones. While the simple-analytic paradigm is seductive for those who want to understand such complexity, subjective-contextualizations may offer a deeper appreciation for the complexity at hand and signal that such complexity may not be understandable, at least in an analytic way. Getting back to the reality of work, how can we assess and use “contextualization” (a.k.a. storytelling) as an alternative method to analysis?

Storytelling Instead of Analysis

There have been some interesting qualitative studies done on this subject. One insightful study by York University Professor Patricia Bradshaw, published in her article, “Reframing Board-Staff Relations: Exploring the Governance Function Using a Storytelling Metaphor,” in the 2002 4th

issue of *Nonprofit Management and Leadership*, indicates the following qualities may help judge whether a story is good:

- It describes a sequence of actions and experiences done or undergone by a certain number of people, whether real or imaginary.
- People are presented either in situations that change or as reacting to such changes.
- In turn, those changes reveal hidden aspects of the situation for thought, action, or both.
- This response to the new situation leads the story toward its conclusion.
- It deals with emotional and relational or expressive tasks (whereas simple-analytic models deal with calculative and systematic tasks).
- Power comes to those who tell the story if others believe the story or the definition of reality that the storyteller creates.
- Legitimacy in the act of storytelling comes from shaping the story to fit the needs of the particular audience.
- It appreciates the criteria of effectiveness that various stakeholders apply.
- It constructs a reality about the organization to influence follower perceptions and expectations.
- It involves artistry in deciding how cohesive and how loose the story needs to be.

By no means a silver-bullet, Bradshaw goes on to warn of the dangers of inappropriate contextualizations: the story may

become hegemonic to the point it may become a taken-for-granted grand narrative of “how things are around here” (i.e., overly-institutionalized or inculcated), or the one who holds power may silence alternative perspectives and perhaps superior frames; hence, the organization may lose its strategic fit with the environment (because it fails to recognize compelling alternative meanings).

A Storytelling Example

Is there an example in DoD of good storytelling? Indeed, the Marines have employed subjective-contextualization in writing doctrine to quite effectively communicate complexity. For example, the 1996 Marine Corps Doctrinal Publication 6, Command and Control, starts off its first chapter with a short story that offers a word picture of command and control in action (done well and done poorly) and illustrates various key points that appear in the text. The chapter can be read separately or in conjunction with the rest of the text. Chapter 1 works from the assumption that in order to develop an effective philosophy of command and control, we must first come to a realistic appreciation for the nature of the process and its related problems and opportunities.

Note the use of the terms “short story,” “word picture,” “philosophy,” and “appreciation.” Chapter 1 of that publication is indeed a short story, richly describing the fictional characters and events in novel combat situations where higher-level headquarters have completely different contexts of unfold-

Differences in Philosophical Orientations

Philosophical Orientations	Ontological Assumptions	Epistemological Assumptions
Simple-Analytic Paradigm	Reality is independent of man. The world is made up of elements, components, ingredients, and so forth that when added together make up the reality we are in. Finding sameness is highly valued. “I’ll believe it when I see it.”	Knowledge is associated with “context-free” principles, axioms, laws, and so on; all knowledge is based in natural sciences epistemology and progress is objective (value-free) development of that knowledge. The key to understanding the world is through analysis (breaking up the world into its parts and seeing how they work). Focus of knowledge is on causality (intended consequences, interventions, technology, etc.)
Subjective-Contextualization Paradigm	Reality can be both physical and metaphysical. The world is a holistic system of interactivities that are linked and inseparable. Discovering uniqueness is highly valued. “I’ll see it when I believe it,” or “This just feels right.”	Context-free knowledge is implausible (i.e., knowledge is contextual and highly descriptive); like language, knowledge is socially constructed and subject to multiple interpretations; while there may be an objective reality, there is also subjective reality (value-laden); the liberal arts and other interpretive methods are also required to appreciate complexity; hence, knowledge is always in flux and transformation. We can find ways to appreciate these interactivities through various levels of evaluation; yet, at the same time, we admit we cannot predict how things will turn out. Focus of knowledge is on aesthetic qualities.

GREAT MOMENTS IN ACQUISITION HISTORY



WOULD YOU GUYS MIND TERRIBLY
MOVING OVER THERE?
OUR CANNON DOESN'T SWIVEL.



1882: L-1 Combat Locomotive operators discover the importance of OT&E

The Marines demonstrate that they are good storytellers and are able to explain their sophisticated concept of command and control through the use of fictional accounts.

When simplicity becomes too difficult to describe and analysis distorts the complexity at hand, there is an alternative paradigm. Here are some suggestions to contemplate:

- Instead of a formal briefing, tell a compelling, interesting story (fiction is okay!).
- Realize that an unemotional analytical argument may be less compelling and interesting than artful rhetoric.
- Instead of breaking a situation down (defining the

ing events. Here is a telling excerpt from the 32-page narrative that comprises Chapter 1, where a Marine platoon took action in the absence of any specific orders to do so:

Takashima called it “a world of hurt for the bad guys.” Damn if those bastards didn’t walk right into it, he thought as he scampered forward to get a better look at the situation at the crossroads where first platoon had just sprung an ambush on the leading elements of the enemy column. I owe Knutsen a beer when this is all over. He couldn’t explain how he knew, but just from the sound of things he could tell that first platoon had caught them pretty good. ... Thank goodness for staff officers, pilots, and subordinate commanders who exercise initiative and quickly adapt to changing situations.

problem), describe the situation with the goal of enhancing appreciation.

- When storytelling, try to avoid using the verb “to be” and any of its conjugations; this will help you avoid analytical categorizations.
- Think of leadership as storytelling—you are creating context when thought-leading.
- Think that to manage includes the “management of meaning.”
- Use collaborative style contextualizations, where others (especially members of other cultures) add to the sensemaking, especially under very complex conditions.
- Hire a few liberal or fine arts majors to complement your stable of analysts.

Simply stated (and perhaps complicated to do), a healthy combination of simple-analytic and subjective-conceptualization philosophies may offer defense professionals (and their bosses) an enhanced worldview.

Why is making things simpler so difficult?

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