

Concept Paper: Alternative Thinking Team (ATT)

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Outline

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Context/Rationale

- Operational contexts increasingly complex
 - **Challenge:** Developing a sufficiently rich understanding especially when there is situational uncertainty and dynamism
 - **Challenge:** Traditional approaches developed for simpler force on force situations
 - **Proposal:** Need to considerably adapt and enhance understanding and planning processes to make them fit for purpose in more complex information age settings
- Also need to address risk of similarity of military thinking leading to group think
 - Hence a means to challenge accepted thinking is required

Origins

- Catalyst for the ATT was UK Joint Operational level C2 exercise in 2015
- Commander instigated a Commander's Innovation Group
 - Asked to observe the exercise and propose potential concepts for improvement in HQ effectiveness
 - 10 concepts were developed and briefed
 - A number were focussed on improving HQ sense-making and minimising surprise
- Ideas were fused to become a concept which includes the intent to challenge command team thinking by assessing evidence against a set of competing narratives

Instigation of the ATT

- Initial exploration of an ‘Integrated Understanding’ concept was undertaken during Exercise Joint Venture 2016
 - Team renamed itself as the ‘Alternative Thinking Team’ (ATT), in order to better convey the nature of the capability it could offer to the wider headquarters.
- Concept founded on a number of underpinning ideas
 - Improved sense-making
 - Requisite variety
 - Minimising surprise and groupthink

Underpinning Ideas

- Sense-making: Comparing with exercise observations, judged that there was insufficient evidence of:
 - *“organization members interpret their environment in and through interactions with others, constructing accounts that allow them to comprehend the world and act collectively.” Maitlis and Christianson (2014)*
- Requisite Variety: Saw little variety of people and ideas
 - Stating Ross Ashby’s law less formally, in order to cope with the diversity of problems in the environment, there is a need to have a range of responses which is (at least) as diverse
- Minimisation of Surprise:
 - Surprises are often the result of decision makers failing to attend to, appreciate and comprehend the meaning of incoming information due to “numerous pathogens”. Bar-Joseph and Sheaffer (1998)

Underpinning Ideas (contd)

- Findings of Chilcot enquiry (2016) into the conflict in Iraq refer to the dangers of group think
- Lessons learned report (2017) includes the need to
 - *“provide greater diversity of thought and views, counteracting group think and checking assumptions.”*

Contrast with similar concepts

- Red Cell:
 - Investigate how a credible adversary ‘red’, might operate and react to blue and other actor actions
- Red teaming:
 - Challenge current assumptions and plans
- Analysis of Competing Hypotheses:
 - Attempts to identify potential hypotheses, assign evidence and arguments for and against each, analytically applying evidence in an attempt to disprove them.

ATT vs NATO Alternative Analysis

ATT is different because it attempts to:

- Challenge sensing, sensemaking and planning at inception
- Ensure wider assumptions are made explicit and are challenged
- Have as a core task the continuous creation, development and maintenance of alternative stories/ narratives/ perspectives as explanations
- Protect ATT time from demanded operational staff work
- Provide a diversity of voices, and new alternative views
- Not focus on just being contrary to something which already exists

Initial Experiences (2016)

- Initial exploration during UK Joint Operational exercise: Joint Venture 2016
 - Team developed alternative ideas, challenged command team thinking, evolved ways of working, and formed key relationships
 - Not participating in the understanding and planning phases made it difficult to get ahead of HQ thinking, and provide alternative views
 - Generated useful lessons learned, and raised the awareness, which increased military interest and commitment to try the concept again

Initial Experiences (2017)

- Second exploration at Exercise Joint Venture 2017 ATT
 - Attempted to operate very much like other parts of the HQ
 - Attended HQ training and development sessions and understanding and planning events
 - Permitted the team to start early development of alternate 'narratives'

Primary Insights

- ATT performed a valuable challenge function within the HQ and the command group
 - Need an operating model and leadership to drive the ATT e.g. prioritising HQ challenges, challenging informal decision making via senior staff “huddles” and before command group meetings
- Tension between developing ideas and engaging with those who might exploit them
 - Need core of team permanently driving idea development: team needs sufficient expertise and confidence to facilitate and drive the work forward
 - Need to maintain sufficient cognitive “separation distance” from the rest of the HQ

Primary Insights (Contd.)

- Concern that the ideas generated were not sufficiently challenging, diverse and surprising
 - Hence a second tension for the ATT i.e. ideas need to be genuinely new and divergent, but not so divergent that they are dismissed as implausible
- Need to constantly record and challenge assumptions
- Need to be encouraged to continuously try a wide range of system thinking techniques
- Electronic whiteboards linked to infrastructure are a boon

Summary

- ATT still an embryonic concept
 - Similarities with previous military ‘challenge’ concepts but also important differences
 - Only been partially observed and evaluated
 - Anecdotal appears promising but there may be unforeseen risks, consequences, gaps and weaknesses
- Potential value of the concept
 - Especially in addressing critically important concerns identified in the UK Chilcot report/Iraq enquiry
 - Suggests further research and development should be undertaken with some urgency

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