



SMALL WARS JOURNAL

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Widening and Flattening: The Case for Decentralized Thinking

by Benjamin Summers

It's no longer realistic to assume all – or even the majority – of “game-changing” decisions will be made at senior levels of command. To the contrary, those decisions are more often made by the individual Soldier on the ground.¹

- General Peter Chiarelli, Vice Chief of Staff, 28 January 2009

Abstract

The “fog of war” has thickened over the past decade. Dynamic operating environments and information overload are two unique challenges that strategists face as we approach our tenth year of conflict in Iraq and Afghanistan. In our operating environment, blurred lines of distinction and sensitive battles of perception have shrunk the gap between tactics and strategy, increasing the risk of “tactical victories” turning into “strategic defeats.”² We face these tactical and strategic challenges in an era where information is so readily available that finding relevance is becoming increasingly difficult. While these two layers of fog hinder visibility for strategists, the Army turns towards our junior leaders to provide new viewpoints and effectively process information. By incorporating more young minds into our problem framing and solving processes, the Army has moved towards decentralizing the way that we think as an organization. Decentralized thinking works because it *widens* our perspective and *flattens* the way that we process information.

To fully embrace this concept of decentralized thinking, the Army must train its junior leaders to become better critical thinkers. Junior leadership training should focus less on the “right answer” and more on the mental calculus that promotes critical thinking. Commanders must ensure that a non-macho culture prevails in their formations so young leaders have the confidence to make decisions when black and white are muddled with grey. Throughout history, strategists have used flexibility to solve complex problems, and as we adapt to find answers in our current fight, our flexible response will ensure that we make the “game-changing” decisions that count.

¹ Vice Chief of Staff Peter Chiarelli, “IDGA NWC 2009 Conference Remarks,” < <http://www.army.mil/-speeches/2009/02/17/16993-gen-chiarelli-idga-nwc-2009-conference-remarks---january-28-2009/> > (20 March 2010).

² Headquarters, International Security Assistance Forces, “Tactical Directive, 6 July 2009,” < http://www.nato.int/isaf/docu/official_texts/Tactical_Directive_090706.pdf > (22 March 2010): 1.

Widening our Perspective

The Army is in the business of problem solving, and in the past decade, our problems have grown in complexity. Blurred lines of distinction between combatants and noncombatants create a heavy fog of ambiguity for our tacticians. Cultural incongruence in the Middle East and South Asia negates the effectiveness of one-size-fits-all solutions. Furthermore, under the watchful eye of public perception, the link between tactics and strategy is continually shrinking. As General McChrystal captured in his Tactical Directive for Afghanistan in 2009, Soldiers “must avoid the trap of winning tactical victories – but suffering strategic defeats.”³ To solve problems in this increasingly complex operating environment, the Army must holistically improve as critical thinkers. Junior leaders should have a major role in this cognitive change. Strategic success hinges on our ability to decentralize the way that we think as we navigate through the murky waters of non-linear warfare.

Colonel (RET) Stephen Gerras, a professor of behavioral sciences at the Army War College, provides a conceptual link between decentralized thinking and enhanced problem solving. He identifies “points of view”, in addition to “assumptions” and “inferences,” as the factors that impact our ability to effectively frame problems and create solutions when we think critically.⁴ Egocentrism, which Gerras describes as the tendency to regard one’s opinions as “most important,” stands as the “most significant barrier to effective critical thinking.”⁵ In any military organization, success and experience breed egocentric tendencies, and although these tendencies buttress a leader’s confidence, they also invite an “overly narrow point of view.”⁶ Overcoming the limits of one specific point of view requires self-awareness and a willingness to invite other perspectives into the problem solving process. With more perspectives, we *widen* our point of view and enhance our ability to solve complex problems.

Research in organizational learning further supports the idea that more perspectives increase an organization’s ability to solve problems. Dr. Chris Argyris, a world-renowned business theorist, distinguishes between “single-loop” and “double-loop” learning in his organizational learning model. Single-loop learning involves solving a problem “without questioning or altering the underlying values of the system.” He uses a thermostat as an example. When the thermostat detects that the temperature in a room is too hot or too cold, it turns the heat on or off accordingly. If, on the other hand, the thermostat asked itself “why it was set to 68 degrees, or why it was programmed as it was,” then it would be a double-loop learner.⁷

Double-loop learning entails “examining and altering” a problem’s “governing variables.” When we use “double-loop” learning as an organization, we add points of view and question assumptions, thus widening our collective perspective. Although single-loop learning is appropriate for “routine, repetitive tasks,” double-loop learning is “more relevant for complex, non-programmable issues.”⁸ Our counterinsurgency efforts fall into this non-programmable

³ Ibid.

⁴ Colonel (RET) Stephen J. Gerras, “Thinking Critically about Critical Thinking; A Fundamental Guide for Strategic Thinkers,” <http://www.au.af.mil/au/awc/awcgate/army-usawc/crit_thkg_gerras.pdf> (15 February 2010): 5.

⁵ Ibid., 8.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Chris Argyris, *On Organizational Learning*, 2nd Edition (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers LTD, 1999): 68.

⁸ Ibid., 69.

category; solving tactical puzzles in Afghanistan and Iraq requires more than a thermostat approach. When we widen our perspective as an organization, we add nuance to an operating environment where distinctions matter.

History provides countless instances where a widened point of view helped military units solve complex problems. At the onset of the Revolutionary War, George Washington faced insurmountable odds. The Continental Army mirrored the patchwork society in America at the time. Freed slaves from New England fought with slave-owners from Virginia. Aristocratic socialites from the Potomac fought with egalitarians from Pennsylvania. Some militias were better equipped and trained than others. Some feared centralized command and any form of authority that compromised their newly found freedom, while others retained a European concept of strong control. As he tried to wrap his hands around this internal incongruence in his army, Washington also faced an extremely formidable force of British and Hessian troops.⁹ To overcome these complexities, Washington encouraged “free exchange of views,” “listened more than he talked,” and “created a community of open discourse” with his commanders.¹⁰ Even in the heat of battle, Washington used councils of war to ensure that his decisions reflected the intricacies on the ground. This conciliatory approach demonstrates Washington’s appreciation for outside input in his decision-making process; a widened perspective increased his capacity to think critically.

In World War I, adding points of view helped the German military overcome a seemingly unsolvable tactical dilemma. Fixed by reinforced trenches spanning thousands of miles, German forces sought innovative measures to wage offensives across “no man’s land.” Bruce I. Gudmundsson, a retired Marine Major and international expert on tactical innovation, provides valuable insight into the German attempt to solve this tactical puzzle in his book *Stormtroop Tactics, Innovation in the German Army, 1914-1918*. Blaming the eventual German defeat on operational and strategic deficiencies, Gudmundsson attributes much of the German military’s tactical success to their decentralized command climates.

Germany instated a series of drill regulations that illustrate the timely decentralization of their military’s organizational structure. While they initially used centralized, slow-moving “column tactics,” German tacticians began leaning towards smaller, more independent formations following the onset of the war. During a period when most European militaries balked at empowering low-ranking officers and NCOs, German junior leaders “proved themselves valuable” as independent leaders and thinkers on the battlefield.¹¹ Furthermore, these self-sufficient junior leaders “possessed the habit of systematically studying the art of war.”¹² This decentralization describes more than an apparent trust granted to junior leaders and the intrinsic motivation within the ranks; it also facilitated quick tactical adaptation. Decentralization widened the German military’s collective perspective as they overcame their trench-line dilemma.

The value of a widened point of view in our current fight cannot be overstated. In a powerful Army Magazine article in 2004, Brigadier General David Fastabend and Mr. Robert

⁹ David Hackett Fisher, *Washington’s Crossing* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004): 7-30.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 316.

¹¹ Bruce I. Gudmundsson, *Stormtroop Tactics: Innovation in the German Army, 1914-1918* (Westport: Praeger Publishers, 1995): 24.

¹² *Ibid.*, 174.

Simpson endorsed an “adapt or die” approach for the Army, arguing that, relative to our adversaries; we must “be superior in the art of learning and adapting.”¹³ A push towards decentralized thinking is part of this adaptation process, particularly in non-linear warfare. Success in a counterinsurgency hinges on our ability to distinguish between friend and foe, protect population centers and the populous from insurgent influence, and empower local leaders. In Afghanistan, these arduous tasks couple with a fragmented culture, dynamic terrain, and decentralized political structures. To face this incongruence, Colonel Michael Fenzel recently endorsed a “district level” approach. Unlike our political institutions in Washington, no ruler in Kabul “can consolidate the loyalty of all tribes in Afghanistan.”¹⁴ To implement an effective counterinsurgency strategy, “we must reach out to every subtribe in each of the 398 districts across the country.”¹⁵ As we shift resources and focus towards these decentralized political, social, and economic structures, we must also shift towards and empower junior leaders to think on the battlefield. By adding flexibility to our efforts, this decentralized approach widens our perspective and enhances our critical thinking capacity.

From the Revolutionary War to our modern day fight, a widened point of view has enhanced a unit’s ability to think critically and overcome complex problems. As indicated by Tactical Directives in Afghanistan, junior leaders in our formations, from trigger-pullers to aircrews, embrace an increased onus to make game-changing decisions on the battlefield. This decentralization of responsibility and thinking follows the conceptual framework that Colonel Gerras describes in his critical thinking model. *Widening our perspective* will facilitate tactical and strategic success in years to come.

Flattening the way that we process information

While decentralized thinking certainly widens an organization’s perspective, it also enhances an organization’s ability to process information. In his book *The World in their Minds: Information Processing, Cognition, and Perception*, Yaacov Vertzberger defines information processing as “an accurate and sophisticated understanding” of one’s environment in terms of the “issues,” “constraints,” and “responses.”¹⁶ In other words, processing, or *filtering*, information means distinguishing between what’s relevant and what’s not. As Soldiers, we have an obvious appreciation for information processing. Relevant information drives missions, and without the right information at the right time, missions go awry, costly resources are wasted, or, in the worst case, somebody gets hurt. Information filters up and down the chains of command, as subordinates help paint a strategic picture for their superiors, while superiors translate strategic, big picture goals into tactical, relevant objectives on the ground. This flow of information is critical to the Army’s success, particularly in a counterinsurgency where a tactical mistake in a village can have strategic ramifications.

¹³ Brigadier General David A. Fastabend and Mr. Robert H. Simpson, “Adapt or Die: The Imperative for a Culture of Innovation in the United States Army,”

<http://www.au.af.mil/au/awc/awcgate/army/culture_of_innovation.pdf> (25 March 2010): 2.

¹⁴ Colonel Michael R. Fenzel, “The Maneuver Company in Afghanistan: Establishing Counterinsurgency Priorities at the District Level,” *Military Review* (March-April 2010): 34.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Yaacov Vertzberger, *The World in Their Minds: Information Processing, Cognition, and Perception in Foreign Policy Decision Making* (Stanford University Press, 1993): 8.

Relevant information in our current fight is important, but obtaining it has never been costlier. General McChrystal recently commented on a busy PowerPoint slide during an update brief, “When we understand that slide, we’ll have won the war.”¹⁷ While frustrating at first glance, the complex slide resembles our current state of information overload. In a Harvard Business Review article entitled “Overload Circuits: Why Smart People Underperform,” Dr. Edward Hallowell describes the impact of too much information on our cognitive abilities. Studies have shown that as our brains process “dizzying amounts of data,” our ability to solve problems “flexibly and creatively” declines.¹⁸ This logic holds true when organizations solve problems. With the myriad of tactical, social, economic and political realities impacting our strategic aims, our information processing channels are pushed to the limit each day. This web of interconnected inputs – battlefield updates, constant newscasts, accessible websites - hinders our ability to distinguish between relevant and irrelevant information, thus testing our filtering capacity.

Although particularly challenging today, information overload is not a new phenomenon. In Vietnam during the Tet Offensive, disseminating information downward, from higher echelons of command to individual Soldiers and Marines on the ground, was particularly challenging for strategists. First, with so much information to transmit to so many ground commanders, “the dissemination of information throughout a command, even aided by modern communications,” was a “huge enterprise.” Additionally, information was likely to be “ignored” if it did not seem “convincing” or “relevant to the ground commander.”¹⁹ To harness subordinates’ attention towards particular information, U.S commanders started giving routine messages high priority classification, which only exasperated the problem.²⁰ Too many high priority messages prevented battalion and company commanders from finding relevant information for their specific areas of operation. In such a dynamic operating environment, relevance in one village might have been irrelevance in another. Even in Vietnam, too much information hampered existing filterers and their ability to find the relevance that induces tactical success.

When I think of the balance between relevant and irrelevant information, many vignettes come to mind from my year in Afghanistan. As a UH-60 pilot, I flew countless Improvised Explosive Device (IED) deterrence missions throughout our deployment. During these missions, we flew over well-traveled roads, searching for any hint of the enemy’s hidden threat. At times, it resembled a real-life “Where’s Waldo” search, as we scanned for roadside abnormalities throughout the Afghan villages, mountains, and valleys. With the threat from IEDs always looming in the back of our minds, we constantly erred on the side of caution, reporting anything that looked out of place. To us, piles of rocks, sticks, dead animals, and overturned dirt could be a relevant sign of an IED, and we diligently relayed our observations to our ground “customers.” With our ambition, however, came a hint of reservation – were we “crying wolf” too often?

¹⁷ Elisabeth Bumiller, “We Have Met the Enemy, and He is PowerPoint,” *New York Times* (27 April 2010): A1.

¹⁸ Edward M. Hallowell, “Overload Circuits: Why Smart People Underperform,” Harvard Business Review < <http://www.avelution.com/Overloaded%20Circuits%20-%20Why%20Smart%20People%20Underperform,%20HBR%202005.pdf> > (20 April 2010): 2.

¹⁹ James J. Wirtz, *The Tet Offensive: Intelligence Failure in War* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991): 6.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 96.

Were we painting an effective picture for the ground units, or simply flooding them with too much information to handle? There was certainly value in the observations that we transmitted, but for the ground units who filtered through that information and distinguished between relevant and irrelevant, a game-changing filtering task rested on their shoulders.

The examples above shed light on the growing epidemic of information overload. Gaining an advantage over our adversary means shortening the “life-cycle” in our decision-making processes without “increasing the failure rate of the decisions being made.”²¹ Information overload hinders our ability to make quick, effective decisions; filtering processes cannot handle the “deluge of data that are insignificant or non-applicable to the task at hand.”²² Making effective decisions in this new information age requires a shift in the way that we process information.

Flattening our processing channels will help resolve this dilemma. Decentralizing the way we think flattens the way that we filter information. By empowering more junior leaders to process information, we simultaneously add more filters and processing channels – a definite cure for finding relevance in a sea of information. As filterers, junior leaders must understand the flow of information in their organizations, grasp the micro and macro pictures at both ends, and use that information to paint each respective picture accordingly. As the Army increases its number of competent filterers, tacticians and strategists will receive better, more relevant products – and hopefully terser PowerPoint slides.

Once again, George Washington provides a telling example of a strategist flattening the way that he processed information. During the Revolutionary War, he encouraged his subordinate commanders to “gather their own intelligence,” maintain a “high degree of autonomy”, and embrace an “open system of information-gathering.”²³ Battlefield inputs aside, the incongruence in American society and stratified nature of the Continental Army produced a sea of information that required efficient, effective processing. By flattening his information-processing channels, Washington overcame information overload on the battlefield.

During Vietnam, the Marine “Combat Action Platoon” concept provided more than a viable way to fight a counterinsurgency; it provided an efficient and effective information-processing platform. These small, platoon-sized elements operated at the village level. Working with the villages’ paramilitary Popular Forces, the Marines fought vigorously to destroy localized “insurgent infrastructure,” protect “people and the government infrastructure,” and organize “local intelligence nets.”²⁴ As decentralized, autonomous platoons, the Marines could appreciate the localized intricacies in each village. Instead of one platoon chasing “relevance” throughout an area with multiple, heterogeneous villages, each platoon could capture relevance in its specific village and paint effective pictures for Generals and Privates. *Flattening worked.*

²¹ Dr. Raymond J. Curts and Dr. Douglas E. Campbell, “Avoiding Information Overload through the Understanding of OODA Loops, A Cognitive Hierarchy and Object-Oriented Analysis and Design,” <<http://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.102.6658&rep=rep1&type=pdf>> (20 April 2010): 3.

²² Ibid.

²³ Fisher, 375.

²⁴ Andrew F. Krepinevich. *The Army and Vietnam* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988), 173.

As the Army decentralizes the way that it thinks, it will *widen* its point of view and *flatten* the way that it processes information. In many regards, the Army has already embraced this concept, endorsing a more collaborative spirit in the way that battle staffs frame and solve complex problems. The new emphasis on design in Army Field Manual (FM) 5-0 illustrates this important doctrinal shift.

The new concept of *design* provides a better way for commanders to approach ambiguous, ill-defined problems. With a focus on design, FM 5-0 embraces the widening and flattening benefits of decentralized thinking. Design is a critical and creative thinking methodology, used to help commanders “understand ill-structured problems,” “anticipate change,” “create opportunities,” and “recognize and manage transitions.” A collaborative spirit prevails throughout this new methodology. By adding more sources and perspectives, commanders and staff “address complexity” before they “impose simplicity.” A collaborative spirit with junior leaders helps commanders widen their organization’s point of view and address the right problems with nuanced solutions.²⁵

Training Young Thinkers

*Most Army schools open with the standard bromide: We are not going to teach you what to think...we are going to teach you how to think. They rarely do.*²⁶

-Brigadier General David A. Fastabend and Robert H. Simpson, February 2004

If the Army wishes to reap the benefits of decentralized thinking, it must train its young officers and NCOs to think critically. Critical thinking requires “deliberate, conscious, appropriate application of reflective skepticism.”²⁷ Critical thinkers “suspend judgment, maintain a healthy skepticism, and exercise an open mind.”²⁸ Junior leaders who can think critically will find answers, provide meaningful perspectives, and filter for relevance in the “complexity, uncertainty, and ambiguity” of our current operating environment.²⁹ Truth can no longer be associated with convenience.³⁰ Critical thinking helps us embrace those inconvenient shades of gray.

This is not a new call for more critical thinkers. Aforementioned Colonel Stephen Gerras and his colleague, Colonel Charles Allen, endorsed the concept of “strategic thinking” in a recent *Military Review* article. Although their article encouraged more creative and critical thinking training for senior leaders, the necessity for critical thinking skills must also apply to junior leaders on the front lines. Over a decade ago, General Charles Krulak so famously coined the phrase “strategic corporal,” acknowledging that young leaders today must make “well-reasoned

²⁵ Brigadier General (P) Edward C. Cardon and Lieutenant Colonel Steve Leonard, “Unleashing Design, Planning and the Art of Battle Command,” *Military Review* (March-April 2010): 2-11.

²⁶ Brigadier General Fastabend, 1.

²⁷ Colonel (RET) Stephen J. Gerras, 3.

²⁸ John Dewey, *How We Think* (New York: Dover Publications, 1997): 6.

²⁹ Colonel (RET) Charles D. Allen and Colonel (RET) Stephen J. Gerras, “Developing Creative and Critical Thinkers,” *Military Review* (November-December 2009): 77.

³⁰ Steven D. Levitt and Stephen J. Dubner, *Freakonomics* (New York: Harper Collins, 2005): 89.

and independent” decisions with potentially strategic implications.³¹ In other words, junior leaders, or “strategic corporals,” must be “strategic thinkers.” If young officers and NCOs are expected to offer viewpoints, find relevant information, and collaborate with superiors, then they must think critically. How do we make critical thinking a priority as we train our junior officers and NCOs?

John Dewey, a preeminent philosopher on education during the early 20th century, provides a timeless foundation for training students to think critically. To Dewey, critical thinking is “wide awake, thorough, and careful reflection – thought in its best sense.” To teach students to think critically, therefore, means to help them form “careful, alert, and thorough habits of thinking.”³² Dewey asserts that “no other thing” works so “fatally against” training of the mind than placing all importance on the “right answer.”³³ The “right answer” approach is surely effective in some regards, like teaching infantry battle drills or aircraft emergency procedures. Memorizing common terms and phraseology helps Soldiers speak a common, synchronized language. The problem is that the “right answer” approach has infected too many aspects of our junior leaders’ training. We’ve all sat through the foot stomps by instructors in classrooms and heard the reassuring words of “you’ll do fine...it’s an Army test.” Maybe it’s time that we change that stigma in Army classrooms, and push students, when appropriate, away from fixation on the right answer and towards the mental calculus that promotes solid, critical thinking.

This change could start with a reemphasis on writing and speaking skills during junior officer and NCO leadership training. Analytical writing embraces the tenets of critical thinking; it forces us to use words to “weigh, ponder, deliberate – terms implying a certain delicate and scrupulous balancing of things against each other.” Although evaluating performance for a written response is more difficult than checking correctness on a multiple-choice test, the benefits of the former – the balancing act inherent in analytical writing - cannot be overstated. Briefing in a classroom setting - displaying command of a subject and answering questions from varying viewpoints - also requires a balanced thinking capacity that deserves a renewed emphasis in training. It’s not that the subject matter in our Warrior Leadership Courses or Basic Officer Leadership Courses needs adjusted; adjusting the ways that we deliver that information and evaluate performance in the classroom will help junior leaders become better critical thinkers. A move away from the “right answer” approach will help us learn “how to think” instead of “what to think.”

³¹ General Charles C. Krulak, “The Strategic Corporal: Leadership in the Three-Block War,” *Marines Magazine* (January 1999) < http://www.au.af.mil/au/awc/awcgate/usmc/strategic_corporal.htm > (27 April 2010).

³² Dewey, 30.

³³ *Ibid.*, 65.

Fostering Thought – The “Non-Macho” Culture

*You have to enable and empower people to make decisions independent of you. As I've learned, each person on a team is an extension of your leadership; if they feel empowered by you - they will magnify your ability to lead. Trust is a great force multiplier.*³⁴

- Tom Ridge, Former Secretary of Homeland Security, 11 February 2004

Once junior leaders reach their assigned units, senior leaders “must create an environment where critical thinking is the norm and reasoned debate replaces unspoken dissent.”³⁵ Or, to steal a phrase from Harvard Business School professor Robin Ely and Stanford professor Debra Meyerson, we must move away from a “macho” culture. To create an environment where all leaders “are open to new information that challenges assumptions” and junior leaders are comfortable admitting mistakes, battalion and company commanders must assure that trust prevails in their formations.³⁶

A trusting environment provides team members with the psychological safety to make tough decisions – to think critically. Psychological safety consists of beliefs about how others will respond when an individual asks a question, seeks feedback, reports a mistake, or proposes a new idea. Amy Edmondson, a professor of Management and Leadership at Harvard Business School, writes that when individuals believe they will be “hurt, embarrassed, or criticized” for a bold decision or idea, they refrain from productive discourse in an organization.³⁷ Of course, psychological safety does not imply a loose working environment where individuals can bend rules and violate protocol without repercussion. Rather, psychological safety promotes the type of careful reflection that distinguishes between critical and simple thinking. A trusting command climate provides junior leaders with the confidence to think critically.

In Afghanistan, our Task Force commander fostered a non-macho culture; he trusted his junior leaders to think critically in ambiguous situations. While flying during a Key Leader Engagement in Afghanistan last year, one Blackhawk in our flight of two struck communication wire during our landing – an incident that normally requires aircraft shutdown, thorough inspection, and a Task Force Commander’s approval for further flight. For us, this black and white answer was muddled with gray, as hundreds of curious villagers started approaching our helicopters. We decided to quickly inspect our aircraft, return to our Forward Operating Base (FOB) and report the incident after landing. It wasn’t long after we returned to our FOB for fuel and lunch that we found ourselves standing at attention in front of our Task Force commander, answering tough questions as to why two aircraft with four junior leaders had drifted so far away from protocol. After we explained our point of view, the factors on the ground, and our decision-making process, he supported our decision – albeit with a hint of scold and warning

³⁴ “Secretary Ridge’s Remarks at Harvard Business School’s Leadership and Values Forum,” <http://www.dhs.gov/xnews/speeches/speech_0154.shtm> (5 June 2010).

³⁵ Colonel (RET) Charles D. Allen and Colonel (RET) Stephen J. Gerras, 80.

³⁶ Dr. Robin J. Ely and Dr. Debra Meyerson, “Unmasking Manly Men,” <<http://hbr.org/2008/07/unmasking-manly-men/ar/1>> (25 May 2010).

³⁷ Roderick M. Kramer and Karen S. Cook (Editors), *Trust and Distrust in Organizations: Dilemma’s and Approaches* (Russell Sage Foundation Publication, 2004): 241 (Amy C. Edmondson authors this chapter).

against aggressive decision-making in the future. The bottom line is that our commander trusted us, and his trust gave us the necessary confidence to think critically. Without trusting command climates, junior leaders cannot make decisions in grey.

Changing the “right answer” stigma in Army schoolhouses and fostering a non-macho culture in our formations are not the only ways to promote critical thinking in junior leaders. As young trainees, we all learn the value of After Action Reviews (AARs) – a practice grounded in the reflective aspects of critical thinking. Training rotations force junior officers and NCOs to solve ambiguous field problems, and constant deployment cycles test leadership creativity. Officer Professional Development (OPD) provides a forum for junior officers to interact with their mentors and explore options with peers. These are just a few of the many ways that the Army encourages critical thinking in its junior leaders, and these concerted efforts will produce young officers and NCOs with the mental capacity to make tough decisions.

Decentralized Thinking: Adapting for the Future

With our doctrinal and tactical changes over the past decade, the Army has already moved towards decentralizing the way that we think as an organization. The case for decentralized thinking – *widening* our perspective and *flattening* the way that we process information – helps us understand *why* decentralization makes so much sense. From Washington’s councils of war to the Marines’ Combat Action Platoon, decentralization has provided strategists with the flexibility to overcome complexity in combat. Placing more cognitive responsibility on junior leaders will help us navigate through the murky waters of non-linear warfare. It will add nuance to an environment where distinctions matter. Most importantly, it will demonstrate the adaptive nature of our Army, promising success against our adversaries for years to come.

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