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Framing a Problem: The Problem with Sound Advice Prepared in Advance

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We often create conditions to receive good advice. Sometimes, advice comes in advance. For example, "when in doubt do the right thing" or "do good and don't bunch up." In a recent blog entry, Dr Jack recounted that the Director of the Combined Arms Doctrine Directorate has defined doctrine as "sound military advice prepared in advance."

Accordingly, FM-3-0, *Operations*, offers some sage advice – frame and reframe the problem. Framing the problem – what does this mean? Perhaps framing the advice will be helpful.

In *The Psychology of Decision Making*, L. R. Beach states that problem framing "involves embedding observed events in a context that gives them meaning." He notes that reframing is necessary when "anomalous events cannot be easily reconciled." In discussing problem framing as planners, J. Mingers and J. Rosenhead observe that unstructured [unframed] problems involve "multiple actors, multiple perspectives, conflicting interests, important intangibles [and] key uncertainties."

When facing unstructured / unframed problems, J. Mingers and J. Brocklesby caution that approaching a situation as a "problem of a particular type is a result of problem structuring rather than being given a starting point." Therefore, planners are better served to "talk of different aspects or dimensions of a problem situation, rather than different types of problem."

In *Rational Analysis for a Problematic World*, J. Rosenhead describes problem framing as activities that help planners develop a level of understanding that enables purposeful activity aimed at a problem. Similarly, in an article titled *Design as Interactions of Problem Framing and Problem Solving,* M. Dzbor and Z. Zdrahal discuss framing as an operation to provide boundaries for problems that involve incomplete information, complexity, and poor structure.

According to TRADOC Pam 525-5-500, problem framing provides a basis from which the commander can visualize the design of his campaign and begin operations to uncover the true nature of the problems he must solve. Problem framing also establishes the basis for unity of effort at every level of command and across all instruments of power. The art of framing the problem is the art of seeing the essential and relevant among the trivial and irrelevant; penetrating the logic of the broad received mission and its messy contextual situation; and reshaping it into a well-enough structured working hypotheses. Framing the problem establishes a general structure of important factors and their relationships.

In FM 3-0, Framing (and reframing) the problem encompasses receiving and clarifying the strategic end state and conditions. It also includes determining the appropriate operational theme, operational approach, and defeat or stability mechanisms. Framing requires understanding and viewing the operational environment from a systemic perspective and identifying and analyzing centers of gravity. Collaboration informs problem framing.
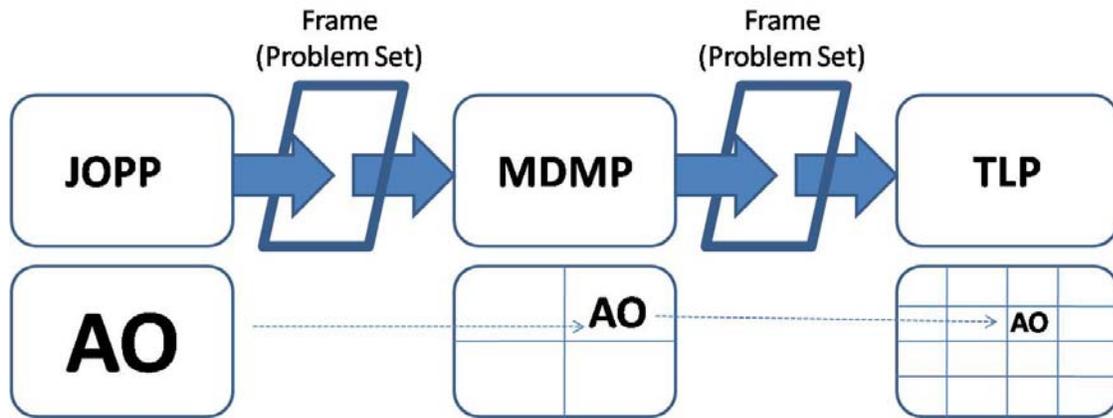
So what? Problem framing:

- Extends to situations of uncertainty the rules and processes associated with the scientific method for problem solving – understanding context before acting on specific problems.
- Deals less with a problem and more with a problem set – with all problems in a given context.
- Is important in situations that involve uncertainty and factors that are difficult to quantify.
- Requires center of gravity (COG) analysis to understand critical relationships between ends, critical capabilities (ways), critical requirements (means), and critical vulnerabilities (potential decisive points) (Refer to Dr Jack Kem's *Campaign Planning: Tools of the Trade*) .
- Provides a forum to accommodate multiple, perspectives for a holistic, system-level appreciation about specific problems that require purposeful activity.

Which means:

- A problem frame describes relationships between a range of important factors, like PMESII-PT. Inside the problem frame, we find multiple mission requirements that induce focused analysis and planning.
- A problem frame highlights a boundary of activities focused on a center of gravity or decisive points.
- Each planning cycle produces a new problem frame or reframe that is context specific.
- Problem framing is the engine that drives collaborative, analytical planning aimed at developing responses to complex problems.

Therefore:

- A problem frame or reframe clarifies a specific problem set and informs purposeful activity aimed on specific tasks (missions).
- Problem framing connects planning models - JOPP, MDMP and TLP. (See figure 1.).

Figure 1.

While not exhaustive, the preceding discussion is representative of "sound advice prepared in advance" on framing a problem. The question for planners is what to do next? Doctrine is silent – if in doubt, do the right thing.

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