Disruptive Thinkers: Defining the Problem

By Peter J. Munson
Journal Article | Apr 9 2012 - 5:00am

Benjamin Kohlmann’s essay, “The Military Needs More Disruptive Thinkers,” struck a chord like no other essay published recently in the Small Wars Journal. In brutal honesty, I have to say that the many sniping comments struck exposed flesh. While an ardent fan of Kohlmann’s essay, I have to agree that his argument was more akin to birdshot at maximum range than a mailed fist to the throat of the problem. Perhaps a better analogy is that his was a marking round lobbed in the general vicinity of the problematic enemy fire. Whatever it was, it was a wildly popular read. For all the comments on the article, the one that rang truest with me came from commener “Null Hypothesis” and asked, “What problem are we trying to solve again?” This was absolutely the right question.

Kohlmann called for disruptive thinkers, but the real question is why? And what are we disrupting? We cannot waste time with harassment and interdiction fires. We must define what targets we are servicing. Today’s military is facing a significant crisis. This crisis has several dimensions. The rank and file of the military who have made or witnessed the massive efforts and sacrifices of the past decade, and who have seen so very little in the way of satisfying results in return, are puzzled by the self-assuredness of their leadership. They question the slogans and the continued assurances that things are “on-track” and that we are accomplishing the mission. They are disappointed by the failures of leadership and imagination that have yielded toxic commands, a rash of firings in some services, and a breach of trust with our most vulnerable servicemembers. They wonder about the future of the weapons systems that support and defend them as they read tales of acquisition woe. They question the growing focus on bureaucratic minutiae. They question how they can be trusted so completely in a combat environment, but are treated as children in garrison. They wonder how a military system that prides itself on justice will reward the generals that have presided over failure, whether at the operational and strategic levels on the battlefield, to the continued failures of the institution in the realms of personnel, acquisition, and budgetary policies, while at the same time eroding the autonomy and discretion of junior commanders with a creeping campaign of bureaucratic centralization.

These are symptoms of a malaise facing the military, of an ossified and decadent institutional culture and a bloated bureaucracy that has grown a profusion of power centers that jealously guard their territory and their budget. This sick institution is facing a time of strategic reset and budgetary retrenchment. Without disruptive thinkers in the organization to question sacred cows, debate reappropriation of funds and efforts, and to challenge the conventional wisdoms created by institutional stakeholders to defend the status quo, America’s military will miss an opportunity to cut and reshape itself into a force both affordable and relevant to coming challenges. Without disruptive thinkers, the coming cuts and reorientation will prove to be a disastrous reinforcement of the dysfunction that decades of an advantaged “resource position” have bred in the Department of Defense.

What problem are we trying to solve again?
The Department of Defense is exhibiting the classic symptoms of a “resource advantaged” corporation that has passed its prime, as I will describe in slightly more detail below. This is a common problem in the business world and, while we cannot run the military entirely like a business, we can certainly learn lessons from the business world about how to avoid decline into irrelevance and how to regain competitiveness. Sure, the U.S. military remains peerless, however we must acknowledge that it has lost some of its edge and surely has passed the point of diminishing budgetary returns. At the grand strategic level, we must recognize that a national security apparatus that insists that we must spend as much on defense as the next 19 nations combined, only two of which can be defined as potential adversaries, has lost sight of the big picture. We should be seeking to husband our fiscal resources and recreate the conditions for our hegemony by investing not only in military capabilities, but in the bases of our economic predominance. Thus, the problem we are trying to solve is as follows. America’s defense complex faces a period of strategic reset and retrenchment, during which disruptive thinking is required in order to challenge the status quo and effect a reorganization and reprioritization of the Department of Defense and its industrial and conceptual supporters. A detailed treatise on all the aspects of this challenge and the potential solutions lies far beyond the scope of this essay. My intent here is only to begin to outline the broadest aspects of the mission and to highlight some specific problem areas where disruptive thinking is needed and some solutions have already been suggested.

The first challenge is to acknowledge the effects of a long, “resource advantaged” position. Richard Rumelt described this well in his business book Good Strategy/Bad Strategy, must reading for anyone interested in charting a path for organizational success. (It is important to note as an aside here – in light of the debate over business schools and other degrees stemming from the Kohlmann piece – that Rumelt is on faculty at the UCLA Anderson School of Management and has also taught at Harvard Business School, where he attained his doctorate, and INSEAD. He started off, however, as an electrical engineer with a Masters degree, working at the Jet Propulsion Laboratories. He, like many others, was a doer, a technical expert, before turning to management. Business school is not solely made up of young elites headed for Goldman Sachs. Things, institutions, and people in the real world are far more multi-dimensional than either Kohlmann, or especially some of his detractors, would have made it seem.) Rumelt describes a very familiar picture of a resource-advantaged organization. “Success leads to laxity and bloat, and these lead to decline. Few organizations avoid this tragic arc.” While organizations with few strategic resources are forced to “adroitly coordinate actions in time and across functions,” as these organizations gain a strategic advantage, they will “loosen their tight integration and begin to rely more on accumulated resources and less on clever business design. ... They will lose the discipline of tight integration, allowing independent fiefdoms to flourish and adding so many products and projects that integration becomes impossible” (pp. 136-137).

Rumelt goes on to describe how organizations on the rebound from monopoly positions or regulated industries have a difficult time in adjusting because of the “inertia in corporate routines and mental maps of the terrain.” They also lack cost data because they have “developed complex systems to justify their costs and prices, systems that hide their real costs even from themselves.” It thus takes years to “wring excess staff costs and other expenses out of its systems” (p. 195). These organizations have created not only a culture, but institutional structures, procedures, and doctrinal justifications for an inefficient, uncompetitive status quo. Why do we need disruptive thinkers? We need disruptive thinkers to challenge this status quo, to break its inertia, and to fight for the much needed cultural and institutional changes.

“The first step in breaking organizational cultural inertia is simplification,” Rumelt continues. “This helps to eliminate the complex routines, processes, and hidden bargains among units that mask waste and inefficiency. Strip out excess layers of administration and halt nonessential operations – sell them off, close them down, spin them off, or outsource the services. … The simpler structure will begin to
illuminate obsolete units, inefficiency, and simple bad behavior that was hidden from sight by complex overlays of administration and self-interest” (p. 211). Following this logic, the coming defense cuts present a significant opportunity to simplify the organization and reinvigorate its culture, but only if disruptive thinkers are willing to challenge the growing mantra in staff headquarters across the military: “Protect the institution.”

To break up these dysfunctions, we need not focus on an entrepreneurial mindset in the form of innovative product development, but rather bold leadership of institutional change and adroit change management once the course is set. We need thinkers willing to disrupt the status quo and willing to do the detailed work of streamlining and reorganizing institutions. We need leaders cognizant of the power of powerful inertia of organizational culture and structure and versed in how to affect change. Despite the many comments to the contrary, these skills can be learned from the business world and from business schools. These skills need not be delivered in the form of a MBA, but they could be. A model to consider is the executive MBA program that many schools have begun to offer for mid-level executives. I am not arguing for a one-size solution for the force, but we may consider creating a tailored executive MBA-type course, or sending those mid-level executives we believe will be change leaders to existing courses. These courses require significant self-study along with a series of residencies, but they are designed for fully employed managers and can be completed in 1.5 to 2 years. The MBA is not the be-all, end-all, but without skilled, educated, and empowered change leaders, all the other educational and entrepreneurial initiatives would be for naught. We must start with change of the organizational culture and structure, breaking up the fiefdoms and conservative “protect the institution” praetorian guards.

The focus on institutional change is paramount. Without institutional change, all other initiatives will only be window dressing. What is more, many who doubt the extent of the cultural problem have only their relatively positive experiences at the division level and below as a reference point. This is where leadership talent is rightfully focused and where long-standing tables of organization have kept wartime bloat away, however these commands have very little control over the broad organizational and strategic decisions that will affect the future of the force. Service and combatant command headquarters, on the other hand, have seen a profusion of additional staff, activated reservists, contractors, special staff sections, and centers of excellence in the past decade – the symptoms of a resource-advantaged position that Rumelt spoke of. Each of these added populations brings its own incentives and interests to defend, complicating the organizational dynamic.

What is more, the desire of most officers to be in the operational world, and the institution’s rightful decision to put our best leaders in charge of troops in combat, means that with the exception of select pockets of excellence, staff headquarters are often a bit of a B-team, and they know it. When you add all of these factors together, the dynamic within these headquarters that determine the future of the force is decidedly dysfunctional, if not outright toxic. Finally, decisions are increasingly made by consensus between these headquarters, allowing each to protect their interests in a very political log-rolling dynamic. Rumelt warns, “Universal buy-in usually signals the absence of choice” (p. 64). Without bold institutional leadership and organizational and cultural change, a crisis is coming as we drift through the cuts and a strategic reset.

The catch-22 is that military leaders have been trained and educated to take bold and decisive action on the battlefield, but have been bred to be risk averse in the organizational environment. This culture came through loud and clear in the comments, from the abhorrence at the term “disruptive” to the many jabs at LT Kohlmann’s inexperience and junior rank. Kohlmann’s treatment was mild compared to those who question budgetary and institutional sacred cows. Few people will continue to put their head above the intellectual parapet in such an environment. Granted, Kohlmann’s essay had flaws, as does every
endeavor, but we do not encourage the refinement of dissenting thought, we attack it. This is a facet of the institutional culture I discussed above. Furthermore, while many attacked his assertions about professional military education (PME), I would agree that it is doctrinaire, especially in the distance education formats that most officers take, and that is not a good thing (please look it up).

More damning, education and intellectual abilities are not truly valued. In the Marine Corps, for example, our physical fitness scores and height and weight are prominently displayed on every fitness report, yet PME, while required, cannot be failed unless one does something criminal. While real learning can be gleaned from PME, at least in residence and if one fully applies oneself, it is not institutionally valued.

Furthermore, PME does not provide students with radically different outsider perspectives. While the attendance of different services’ officers, foreign officers and defense civilians, and employees of other agencies provides some diversity, this hardly brings disruptively new ideas to the classroom from disparate fields of experience. In all, these deficiencies are extremely crippling when it comes to trying to change the institutional culture of a closed organization. While corporations can bring in outside experts and executives to reinvigorate their culture, the military would never countenance such a thing in their leadership ranks. This is reasonable, but all the more reason to encourage diversified education and innovative thought from the earliest days of an officer’s education and training. The attitude of many commenters toward outside perspectives was quite symptomatic of a force that is increasingly isolated from society and has a growing sense of entitlement and superiority. These are hardly characteristics of a healthy organization, especially one facing a period of reorganization and retrenchment. Building more cross-disciplinary ties and increasing linkages with the society we serve – the sole reason for our being and the sole source of our military might – are absolutely critical to our future. Building more cross-disciplinary ties and increasing linkages with the society we serve – the sole reason for our being and the sole source of our military might – are absolutely critical to our future.

Finally, as the military begins to draw down in the coming years, a dysfunctional institutional culture will drive some of its most talented officers out. Whether due to generational differences or a decade of operational experience, or perhaps the tyranny of the creeping centralization by the growing headquarters staffs, many of the “middle management” in today’s military are deeply disgruntled with the dysfunctional, if not toxic situations they find themselves in. They are disgusted by the excesses of a resource-advantaged organization and dismayed that despite their best efforts, their leadership has not been able to lead them to strategic victory, or at least something approaching it. When they do comment on their perception of the strategic, budgetary, acquisition, and institutional failures of their organization, they are patronizingly told that they do not and cannot understand the issues. Their concerns are dismissed, often with disdain, by the guardians of the institution and the hangers-on who are older and supposedly wiser. These dismissals ring especially false in the face of continued poor institutional performance. As a result, there is a growing breach of trust and respect between elements of the middle management on one hand, and the institutional leadership and their guardians on the other. It is not pay or operational tempo that will drive talent out, but disgust with a broken organization that does not utilize them to their full potential.

Kohlmann’s reference to a 31-year old Goldman Sachs vice president was perhaps unconvincing to this audience. The critics will likewise find fault with this example. President Obama nominated 38-year old Brett McGurk to be the next ambassador to Iraq. While many are attacking this choice, McGurk is being considered for a job roughly equivalent to that of a 4-star general, while his military counterparts of the
same age would just be pinning on lieutenant colonel. What is more, he has already held positions of far more influence than even a lieutenant colonel would muster. The point is that a military that needs agility and cultural change would be well served to bring some flexibility into its personnel policies, recognizing that some people will internalize more experience in 15 years than others would in 30. Additionally, the growing trust gap I alluded to is fuelled when extremely talented middle managers languish under incompetent leadership that the system has promoted beyond their level of competence.

On the point of competence, I completely agree with all the comments that stressed the bedrock requirement for tactical and technical proficiency above all. Competence breeds confidence and confidence is what is lacking in almost every toxic commander. Like a flight instructor, you have to be confident in and cognizant of your capabilities and limitations in order to let the student learn to fly the plane. Toxic leaders lack this confidence and self-understanding. They scream at juniors for trying to fly the plane ahead of their time. Then when they need the junior to fly a plane they haven't been taught or groomed to fly, they scream at them for not knowing how. Just as we must learn our tactical jobs, leaders need to be properly selected and educated for the far different challenges of organizational leadership and management at higher levels. Our promotion and education system often fails in this task, putting senior officers in waters they never could handle, while talented juniors look on in disgust, the most talented knowing they could do better. If we do not let them do better, we are missing an opportunity to improve the organization and we will be missing their talents when they walk away to greener pastures.

Disruptive thinkers are not a threat to good order and discipline, nor to mission accomplishment. Disruptive non-thinkers, on the other hand, are. We are in for times far more challenging than most of our force can currently foresee. In order to find success, we will have to encourage disruptive thinking to spur innovation from the bottom up. This will never happen, however, if we do not get the coming transition right by empowering the right change leaders to think and act disruptively to change our organizational structure and culture from the top down.

About the Author

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