

Logistics and the (Lost?) Art of Red Teaming

■ By Dr. Christopher R. Paparone and George L. Topic Jr.

One of the most valuable tools used by senior managers and leaders in almost all types of organizations is known as “red teaming.” It is the process of critically examining and challenging the basic assumptions underpinning professional knowledge, planning, programming, ideas, or initiatives.

Red teaming is used by competitive businesses when preparing proposals to win contracts. Similarly, national security exercises routinely have red team cells for the express purpose of considering out-of-the-box approaches and offering blunt challenges to the organizations and leaders that participate.

We are interested in the logistics community’s answer to this question: How often and how well does the U.S. defense logistics enterprise red team its major efforts? If it is not especially effective at this process, it might be useful to look at why and consider ways to improve a valuable process.

In his book, *Cleopatra’s Nose: Essays on the Unexpected*, Pulitzer Prize-winning historian Daniel J. Boorstin asserts that “the history of Western science confirms the aphorism that the great menace to progress is not ignorance but the illusion of knowledge. ... The negative discoverer is the historic dissolver of illusions.” The point he makes, and the one we intend here, is that institutions tend to depend on habituated knowledge structures and processes that often go unchallenged.

Based on our experience and observations over the years, we believe that this phenomenon is often seen across the joint logistics community. In fact, logistics is an area where red teaming may offer a very high payoff, yet it appears unused. Our community does

not seem to engage routinely in organized knowledge red teaming.

As logisticians pursue refinements and additions to our professional body of knowledge, we suggest that red teaming be a critical part of the change management process. One of the major issues that red teaming seeks to mitigate is groupthink, which, according to *Merriam-Webster*, is “a pattern of thought characterized by self-deception, forced manufacture of consent, and conformity to group values and ethics.”

Overcoming groupthink has at least three barriers. The first is hierarchy, the governance of organizations through the authority vested in rank and position. While military hierarchy is essential to discipline and exigency, it can also ensure fearful and unquestioned compliance. We all know of situations in which leaders have stated, in effect, “Either get on board, or get out of the way.” This approach will neither incentivize critical assessments nor encourage innovative ideas.

A second barrier to effective red teaming is the cultural propensity to value “the team” more than the decision that needs to be made and the consequences that follow. It is important for leaders to recognize both internally and publicly that the military institution has an unwritten ethic not to embarrass fellow members, even if their recommendations or silent consent for a decision could be effectively criticized.

Third and similarly, a degree of self-censoring may be correlated to the importance of the decision. In other words, the more important the decision, the less likely it is that the individual will speak up with an al-

ternative idea because the suggested alternative may fail; hence, that person will receive the blame.

Logisticians, and leaders of all stripes, must find ways to mitigate some of these barriers to criticism. One way might be to institutionalize forms of anonymity for the purpose of red teaming. The cures to groupthink are arguably what would separate professional institutions from lay institutions. In academic and most professional publications, for example, double-blind peer reviews help ensure criticism is not masked by hierarchy, group affiliation, or fear of blame.

Finally we believe that military logistics teaching institutions should be at the vanguard of encouraging a culture of red teaming at all levels. While specific prescriptions for making such a dramatic cultural change are too lengthy for this column, we hope the logistics community will encourage red teaming in professional development efforts. We recommend doing a web search for the U.S. Army University of Foreign Military and Cultural Studies. The university’s website explains the essence of red teaming and is a source of remedies for groupthink.

Perhaps the most important lesson we can teach our future leaders is the importance of candid and critical assessments; Boorstin’s “illusion of knowledge” can truly be dangerous.

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