

Wargaming – what have you got to lose?

When you strip a military, government or business organisation of any size to its basics, it is about people creating value for others, and as a consequence enhancing their own. Paraphrasing US President John F. Kennedy, it is about asking not what others can do for you, but what you can do for them. When done well, it builds enduring relationships solidified by trust.

This isn't soft-hearted sentiment. In an increasingly competitive and risk-filled world we need each other more than ever to get ahead and achieve long-term success. This is a whole lot easier to achieve when others are happy to support and collaborate with you, rather than hoping for or actively working on your downfall. Making it happen in the face of uncertainty with others over whom you might have no control, and who have different or perhaps even competing perceptions, is a great challenge many leaders face daily.

Delivering value to others can be interpreted narrowly as an exchange of goods or services for money. In that case, it is simply about providing and assuring "value for money", a core objective of many Defence departments around the world when procuring new military capabilities from industry. Here the focus is typically on the transaction itself, which is often managed and controlled in the belief that requirements and benefits are not vulnerable to changing conditions in the operating environment.

Beyond procuring and owning military capability or projecting and deploying force, it is about an exchange of trust and the promise to look out for each other's best interests. In this case, intentions are a big part of actions taken, and reputations the consequence. The focus here is on ensuring engagements are meaningful, enrich lives, and lead to long-term relationships based on mutual trust and loyalty.

It is this broader perspective that we as human beings are hardwired for and crave, rather than the transactional one. We are social animals and desire to connect and be appreciated. When someone truly understands what matters to us, consistently places our needs before their own, i.e. serving us before serving themselves, it engenders a desire to reciprocate and go the extra mile to not let them down. These behaviours cultivate esprit de corps, drive high-performance, and inspire loyalty across boundaries. In turn, it builds reputations that are successful and resilient.

People's fundamental needs are timeless: a desire for social connection and collaboration, food, shelter, safety, esteem, personal growth and fulfilment. Their wants and expectations, however, shaped by values, norms, stories, experiences and preferences, are different and evolve constantly.

As a result, different perceptions or lifestyles of how the world should be, and how events are interpreted, emerge naturally.

Each of these perspectives competes for scarce attention and resources to further its interests or cause, which can lead to confrontations.

Today's conflicts, religious and territorial disputes in parts of Africa, the Middle East, Ukraine and elsewhere as well as acts of terrorism and piracy are clear examples of this.

These dynamics, combined with new technologies that make it possible for anyone to instantly connect, share information, build communities with like-minded others and create disruptive innovations that level the playing field, explain why today's world is increasingly more volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous. Maintaining a narrow, linear vision and adhering to rational, analytical, directed approaches for creating and assuring value in the face of these conditions make unpleasant surprises inevitable and spell doom.



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Figure 1: A Royal Navy Sea King helicopter with 845 Naval Air Squadron from HMS Illustrious hovers over a message from a grateful community during the relief operation Patwin in the Philippines.



Figure 2: A Royal Navy Merlin helicopter provides cover for Royal Marines from Fleet Protection Group Royal Marines (FPGRM) as they board a suspicious dhow.

Huddled behind a desk deep inside a headquarters, government department, or program management office, weighed down by administrative trivia, politicking and quarterly performance targets, it is easy to become blindsided to all this.

As once-leading brands like Blackberry and Kodak or events such as 9/11, the 2008 economic crisis, and last year's Sony cyber attack show, without forward thinking and proactive preparation, one can quickly become a victim of unexpected change.

Remaining relevant and succeeding in today's fast-paced, complex and uncertain world requires the mentality of a change agent. Always anticipating the unexpected with a healthy dose of scepticism. Constantly searching for ways to serve others and make things better. Breaking down silos and communication barriers, and investing in new capabilities and boundary-spanning relationships. These behaviours need to be second nature, at the individual and organisational level, to rapidly learn, adapt, and advance in the 21st century.

It means being willing to explore endless opportunities and viewing risk as your best friend. It entails creating a safe and collaborative environment where information, concerns, points of view and ideas are freely shared to quickly develop shared understanding and awareness, and proactively turn problems into new opportunities. Many large organisations, however, are not set up to support this.

Unless people have identified the need for thinking and working differently themselves, change is hard to affect through reason alone. Successful change requires a disruption of normal operating conditions so that people experience first-hand that continuing with habitual practices will lead to undesirable outcomes. This does not require creating a "burning platform." It can be initiated through informal conversations that start with a question that explicitly challenges prevailing assumptions and beliefs.

For example, *"Imagine you were one of our opponents/competitors, and you had extremely limited resources, how and where would you attack our strategy?"*

The conversation might evolve by exploring how the organisation could react, and perhaps how an opponent might try to counter that. Although simple, these conversations encourage people to look at their world through different eyes and make sense of emerging risks and opportunities.

The challenge with these types of conversations, however, is to actually get people moving out of their comfort zones, acting and thinking differently going forward. Without a good understanding of the key players in the operating environment, their intentions and capabilities, and walking in their shoes, reacting to the organisation's and others' actions to protect and champion their interests, it is often hard to get free from the grip of the "our strategy will work" mindset.

Wargaming takes these conversations that extra step further by engaging people from across the organisation and, where relevant, key stakeholder organisations. By having teams in a structured, interactive way role-play significant stakeholders and opponents in a realistic scenario, diverse perspectives, consequences of proposed actions as well as influence of accidental and random events can be explored and understood before risking resources and effort.

The adversarial process of action-reaction-counter-action underpinning this approach does not only reveal risks, weaknesses, and possibilities. By having teams role-play different stakeholders, and thus having to challenge their own beliefs and arguments from others' perspectives, the process breaks down personal, organisational and cultural boundaries. As a result, it develops a shared situational understanding and awareness. It also improves the quality of thinking because when people and game-changing ideas compete, they generally get better.

In a social world that changes constantly in complex, unpredictable, and uncontrollable ways, success increasingly depends on the ability to form meaningful relationships with others and quickly learn how to creatively adapt to new realities. Wargaming facilitates this in a simple and pragmatic way, making it a powerful approach for creating a valued difference.



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