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COUNTERPOINT: LAYING THE GROUNDWORK FOR THE FIRST GEOSPATIAL RED TEAM

by

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SYNTHESIS*
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*The Synthesis can take a variety of forms, from a position paper to curriculum or professional development workshop to an original contribution in the creative arts or writing. The expectation is that students use their Synthesis to show how they have integrated knowledge, tools, experience, and support gained in the program so as to prepare themselves to be constructive, reflective agents of change in work, education, social movements, science, creative arts, or other endeavors.
ABSTRACT

The goal of this synthesis has been to develop a set of principles or strategies to guide the establishment of a permanent red team within the National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency (NGA). Over the course of a decade spent working at NGA, I discovered a passion for analytic tradecraft and looking for ways I can push the agency toward a culture that allows critical and creative thinking to thrive. This paper combines my research about organizational culture and reflective narratives about events and observations that shaped my understanding of NGA’s current organizational culture. I identify significant blind spots in our organizational approach to teams, such as a shared assumption that possessing general intelligence guarantees a person can collaborate with others consistently and effectively. Rather than outlining specific processes the new red team, Counterpoint, should follow once employees are hired, I instead focus on how we should start with building a team culture that aligns with our mission rather than hoping the necessary pieces will fall into place without deliberate effort.
Introduction & Background

The National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency (NGA) is a federal agency nested under the United States’ Department of Defense (DoD). NGA employees analyze geospatial data in support of both classified and unclassified missions. (“About NGA,” n.d.) A large portion of the agency’s approximately 14,500-person workforce is devoted to generating classified intelligence about a wide variety of national security issues; formal assessments about these topics are published in classified reports for dissemination to both domestic customers within the government and military and foreign allies. The judgments in these reports inform viewpoints in the wider intelligence community and decisions made by policymakers about a wide range of issues affecting national security and international diplomacy.

In my nearly 12 years of employment at the agency, I have worked as an imagery analyst, editor, production manager, analytic facilitator, and adjunct instructor in the agency’s National Geospatial-Intelligence College. My experience in these roles has given me a deep knowledge of our workforce and the work they do. My most recent position as analytic facilitator gave me the broadest view, as I supported the entire breadth of intelligence issues NGA handles and was not limited to one region or office. This is a very unusual career path in the agency, and I might be the only person in a workforce of thousands that has held that selection of roles. I started my career at NGA as an imagery analyst and completed the agency’s basic analytic training course. During my time as an analyst, I authored and co-authored several formal intelligence reports, which gave me a foundational understanding of the agency’s product line.

After two years as an analyst, I transitioned to being an editor in the production department. Editors at NGA do both content and copy editing on the same types of reports I wrote as an analyst. These jobs were distinguished by two main differences: I now found myself viewing
products from a very different perspective, and I was no longer assigned to one specific geographic area or topic. Editing mostly finished products from all the agency’s analytic offices built up my knowledge of our analytic habits, quirks, and blind spots.

Six years into my career, I had gained valuable experience working on analytic products from two different angles but didn’t feel particularly welcome or well-utilized at the agency. Luckily an opportunity presented itself to take on a then-new role of ‘story developer’, and I discovered my calling within the intelligence realm: helping analysts clarify their thoughts and express analytic judgments clearly in written and verbal formats.

**The Puzzle of Intelligence Analysis**

Over the years I have come to rely on jigsaw puzzles as a metaphor for explaining what intelligence analysis is like, both to people outside the profession and those inside it when they are struggling to decide on or understand a course of action. I find this metaphor is also helpful for highlighting what kinds of tasks do and do not require what I view as critical thinking.

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1 This job title was later changed to *analytic facilitator*, which is why both terms appear in the paper depending on what time frame I am referring to.
A common type of jigsaw puzzle that most people are familiar with is rectangular, with four straight sides. The number of puzzle pieces is labeled clearly on the box, so you can choose puzzles based on their relative level of difficulty or how much time they require to put together. (Bogle, 2021) The puzzle’s box displays a picture of the finished picture, which acts as a frame of reference when one is putting it together.² A reliable way for efficiently putting together a rectangular puzzle is to sort out the edge pieces first, which are easy to spot because there is at least one straight side on each of them. Completing the perimeter first equates to establishing the boundaries of a problem and then working your way to the center. Along the way, each piece from the pile gets put in its proper place and you end with a completed puzzle that matches the picture on the box.

There are parallels to this process in intelligence analysis, which is what makes the metaphor work. But in the intelligence analysis version of a puzzle, each step is more complex and harder to define. Doing intelligence analysis is more like solving a puzzle that has an

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² These descriptions refer to the approach an average person might take when putting together a puzzle for fun. This form of puzzling is a low-stress activity; processes and attitudes demonstrated by competitive puzzlers likely look very different.
irregular shape, and there is no reference photo to aid you. You don’t know how many pieces there should be or if you have all of them. It’s up to you to determine if you’re missing pieces and, if so, where to look for them. That adds a scavenger hunt element to the process. On your hunt for pieces, you might find some that are for an entirely different puzzle. The edges of the puzzle are not straight, so you cannot easily distinguish which pieces go in the middle or on the perimeter. All these mysteries must be figured out as you go. How do you select an effective strategy? How do you tell if you’re making progress or moving backward? If you don’t know how big the finished puzzle is, how do you know when to stop looking for more pieces that fit?

Because you don’t know what picture is on the puzzle, it can look mind-numbingly abstract for most of the process. The point at which the overall picture transitions from abstract to concrete varies by topic and can be unpredictable. That moment of realization also happens at different times for people working on the same puzzle, which can lead to conflicts when one person sees the ‘big picture’ before someone else does or there are diverging opinions on what the big picture shows.

The dichotomy between these two types of puzzles also symbolizes how I distinguish critical thinking from other forms of cognition. Putting together a conventional puzzle is, in cognitive terms, akin to task performance. The end goal is clear and unambiguous. There is a little freedom in choosing how you will put it together—will you use an organized strategy, or pull pieces from the pile at random? Put the whole thing together in one sitting or complete it in stages? But the deep structure of this type of problem rarely changes. You know from beginning to end how many pieces you’re working with and what the end result should look like. There is a clear beginning—opening the box and dumping the pieces out—followed by some amount of time elapsing, and a definitive end once the puzzle is completed.
An activity like the puzzle of intelligence analysis is more likely to require critical thinking because one is not simply performing clear-cut tasks. The progression is not as linear and there is not a reference or answer key to tell us if we are on the right track or not. I’ve been attempting to define critical thinking throughout my time in this program and the most defining characteristic I see is that it is open-ended. It always involves divergent thinking, considering a body of ideas in tension with each other, continually generating and refining questions, and balancing perseverance with inquiry. This is the basic understanding of critical thinking I’ve arrived at after years of observing and talking to GEOINT professionals about their work, noticing different definitions of critical thinking that have been thrown around at NGA, and trying to reconcile that information with what I learned as a student in a critical thinking program.

**Working on a Great Team**

I do not recall having a clear idea of what critical thinking was when I joined the story development team in 2014, but I became very interested in it over the next few years. The set mission for the then-nascent team was to improve the structure and analytic rigor of intelligence reports by facilitating outline meetings with analysts and their managers. This expectation fell under a broader goal of improving critical thinking at the agency. The team was established to address weaknesses in our reporting and ostensibly teach analysts how to plan out their drafts better. Someone important³ had theorized that putting more emphasis on planning drafts in a

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³ I don’t know who because NGA does not have a strong tradition of knowledge capture, which in this context would have comprised recording where and how ideas originate. Decision-making about strategic initiatives is often done behind closed doors, and the majority of employees do not know anything about these initiatives until they are told to execute a new strategy or process.
collaborative manner would result in the kinds of quality improvements our leadership wanted to see and resolve other common bottlenecks in the production process.

**Clues About Agency Culture and Problem-Framing**

It feels strange in hindsight to consider how little clarification we asked for when we received such vague guidance as “improve critical thinking” during those days. But the absence of questions or clarification about what we were expected to do is a typical response at NGA, and perhaps my first tangible clue that spontaneous dialogue between levels of the hierarchy is not a key feature of our organizational culture. (Zenko, 2015) The most common reaction to vague guidance is to assume the new problem is essentially the same as problems we have encountered before and can be solved with the same set of tools and strategies. Sometimes the opposite occurs; we throw new tools and approaches at a problem because we do not realize it is simply a variation on an old problem we have solved before. Regardless, the basic assumption in my organization is that any goal or vision communicated from the top of our hierarchy is inherently good and achievable. And wherever you happen to sit in the hierarchy, your job is to execute the vision of the level above you.

![Hierarchical structure]

One of the cognitive traps prevalent in NGA is the expectation held especially by senior leaders that linear progress will immediately follow any guidance given to the workforce. This belief is upheld by assumptions that every employee reads and immediately understands what is being communicated, has the tools or training needed to follow the guidance appropriately, and
plans to do so. The presence of any roadblocks or mitigating factors is not acknowledged. The end result is a constant tug of war in which we get broad commands from upper management and are on our own to figure out how to make their visions a reality. Although I did not realize it at the time, I was starting to see the workforce’s everyday challenges and activities through the lens of system thinking. (Meadows, 2008) I couldn’t reconcile the disconnect between what I saw in front of me—system dynamics in motion—and the institutional tendency to treat too many things through the lens of the individual. More specifically, anything bad. When we succeeded, our leaders praised our great teamwork and spirit of collaboration. The message was clear: we succeed together. But there was no complementary critique for failures or mistakes, even when studying organizational failures would have yielded valuable lessons about what went wrong.

The subtext was clear: if you succeed, it’s because you were helped by the system around you. When you fail, it’s because you screwed something up. The system did not fail; you did.

Through the story developer job I came to understand a couple important truths that would guide my work from that point forward: building long-term organizational success requires employees to step outside their assigned roles and look at the big picture, and that I enjoyed working in tradecraft and had finally found my niche at the agency.4 Because the team at that time had all been hired internally and everyone was steeped in NGA culture, we were not starting from zero in trying to decipher what improving critical thinking and product quality could entail. The way we approached that vague mission provides some helpful clues I would use years later when trying to piece together an agency definition of critical thinking.

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4 One of my bosses later remarked to me how he’d watched me grow from a quiet, timid presence to a confident and articulate resource for analysts during this time. It happened gradually enough that I didn’t notice how much my demeanor changed, but it makes sense when I think of the personal breakthroughs I experienced. Now I think of his comment as evidence that he realized I’d found my stride before I did.
In the first 2-3 years of the team’s existence, our approach to our mission evolved along three main paths:

1. **Building the IC’s analytic tradecraft standards into our main service, story development.** (‘‘Intelligence Community Directive 203: Analytic Standards,’’ 2015) The most official and wide-reaching expectations for analytic quality in the IC are communicated in a series of intelligence community directives. (‘‘Objectivity,’’ n.d.) Each agency is mandated by law to internally review a portion of its published reports against these standards and provide those ratings to the Office of the National Director of Intelligence (ODNI). The ODNI independently reviews a smaller portion of each agency’s annual output.

2. **Distinguishing quality of written products over quantity.** In formal and informal interactions with Analysis employees, we stressed not only the official standards for analytic quality but also the big picture of analysis: every report needed to add something new to a larger story. This was a sea change from the unofficial but fairly widespread habit of rating employees’ performance by how many reports they authored each year. The subtext that had been communicated for years was *boosting your numbers is more important than worrying about the impact your reporting has on our mission or customers.* For many in the workforce, attempting to integrate quality standards into the writing process was a totally new experience that seemed impossible at first. Through the repeated efforts of my team, in coordination with other relevant stakeholders in the agency, we achieved notable improvements.

3. **Teaching a structured, collaborative approach to writing.**

There’s no official record of what, if any, specific writing process was followed by analysts before story development was adopted. From conversations with employees over the years,
I’ve gathered that the most common approach was the unstructured one I followed as a new analyst. Someone above me in the food chain (team lead or branch chief) would assign me a topic to write about and maybe, depending on how organized they were, give me a deadline. No specific template was provided, even though there were specific requirements for formatting report metadata. You learned how to get through the writing process ‘the hard way’ – by making mistakes (which you couldn’t avoid because you had no idea what to avoid) and being corrected on them by more senior employees and/or your management chain. The amount of support and feedback provided to an author throughout this process was unpredictable and entirely dependent on the personalities in the author’s review chain.

I probably don’t need to go any further for you to imagine plenty of ways this ‘process’ could break down. Taking a more structured approach not only helped clarify the most important takeaways that needed to be highlighted in a report but bringing more people into the conversation earlier allowed us the benefit of collective reasoning, so the pressure was not all on one analyst to figure things out on their own. My team was in charge of leading the discussions, which provided a forum for stakeholders to voice concerns before an entire draft had been written. When participants fully engaged in the process, it was productive for everyone involved and helped avoid bottlenecks later in the review process.

Being a part of this team was transformative for me. The job involved a lot more experimentation than my previous ones, because we were asked to do something that hadn’t been done at the agency before. In contrast, the analyst and editor work roles had existed for years and the associated responsibilities and boundaries were well-defined. The story development team started with only theories about how we should go about the job and what would or would not work. Fortunately, the team was staffed with the right group of individuals who were willing to
experiment until we determined what strategies and processes got us going in the right direction. That first group of story developers was the best team I have been a part of thus far in my career.

Our disposition toward experimenting was fairly unusual within the agency at that time; the vast majority of teams and offices have clearly defined missions, production goals, and responsibilities. Now that I can reflect on my experience working as one of the first story developers, the team’s evolution roughly followed this timeline: the first two years were spent honing our process for leading product conceptualization, (story development sessions) writing follow-up notes, and gaining traction with the workforce. During those first two years, we were piloting a process and operating somewhat like salesman, trying to convince analytic units to meet with us.

After two years, we reached a tipping point—enough teams had had positive experiences working with us that multiple offices added story development as a required step in their production workflows. From that point forward, our focus turned more toward issues of hiring and training new members as the original group moved on to other career opportunities and managing the now-steady influx of requests for meetings. I got to see up close how the combination of autonomy and a shared vision can empower employees to experiment and generate creative ideas.

If I had not wound up on this team by chance, my life probably would have taken a different path and I might not even work at NGA anymore. Working on this team was the first time I felt like I was given big responsibilities and given the space to figure things out on my own. The traditional and most common method of pushing for change at the agency is top-down. Its prevalence translates into a collective assumption that the most valuable guidance and insight will be communicated in a trickle-down fashion. The story development team’s push for change
wasn’t the exact opposite, which would have been bottom-up, but rather a sharing of guidance and insight from the middle moving outward. The team was staffed by high-performing mid-career analysts who used their knowledge of the agency’s mission and its people to change the way analytic units plan and write their products. This change happened in stages, and support from key leaders did help along the way. But the momentum was built by a small group of highly motivated employees who walked the walked and painstakingly earned the workforce’s trust in a new process.

Willingness to experiment and generate buy-in around new processes were not the only characteristics that made the team great. The attitudes teammates demonstrated toward each other were also different from most other teams I’ve observed. NGA is a very hierarchical organization where opportunities and expectations are pegged to employee’s pay bands. Employees are even referred to by their band numbers in conversation, i.e. I would be called a “band IV” if someone inquired about my role in the tradecraft office. I started as a band III story developer, and after a promotion and rebranding of the role, departed for school as a band IV
analytic facilitator. On the original team of story developers, we all functioned roughly the same regardless of our band level or experience. Part of this may have been due to the newness of the role; there was not enough institutional knowledge of it to assign responsibilities to employees based on rank. Whatever the cause, it made for an extremely engaging and psychologically safe environment. My colleagues treated me as an equal and invested generous amounts of time and attention in my professional development.

The default goal for any employee is to get promoted to a higher band as many times in one’s career as possible, which is somewhat similar to the attitude of career military officers—with the main difference being there are far fewer pay bands than military ranks. This system presents a couple of cruel ironies: first, you cannot hope to get promoted to a higher pay band unless you can demonstrate you’re already operating above your current band. However, it can be very difficult to get the developmental experience you need when the best opportunities are divvied up between higher ranking employees. Second, we may refer to someone’s pay band explicitly, but the implicit messaging is really about their ability to think and how seriously their opinions should be taken. Although we are a civilian organization on paper, so much is determined by pay band that we might as well display them as rank insignia like military personnel.

The pay band caste system is so ingrained at the agency that few employees question it—at least publicly. Anyone who dares to do so is usually written off as disgruntled because of entitlement and a personal failure to get promoted. In practice, employees end up interacting and socializing mostly with their peers in the same band. Unusually for NGA, the story development team had employees at multiple band levels performing the same job role with no meaningful differences in expectations between individuals. This contributed to a unique team dynamic that not only played a formative role in my trajectory, but I believe also made it possible for the team
to achieve what it did. I joined the team as a band III with six years’ experience and did the same job as a band V colleague ~25 years my senior.

A Tradecraft Breakthrough

In 2017, I began a multi-year project to educate the workforce about analysis of alternatives, one of the analytic tradecraft standards NGA products are rated against by internal reviewers and ODNI.5 (“Intelligence Community Directive 203: Analytic Standards,” 2015) I started looking closely at analysis of alternatives, or A of A for short, because we simply did not know enough about it even though we were supposed to be routinely incorporating it in our products. It has been one of the IC’s analytic tradecraft standards since 2007 and performance on this standard was consistently worse than the other ones, among all agencies. (“Intelligence Community Directive 203: Analytic Standards,” 2015)

I observed a briefing on A of A one day and realized that we were all repeating the same vague statements to each other – “We’re supposed to do more analysis of alternatives” – without any real understanding of what ‘doing more analysis of alternatives’ looked like or how to start. We had no institutional knowledge about A of A beyond an awareness that it was something we were supposed to do. I concluded we were doomed to continue performing poorly on the standard unless some built up expertise and spread that knowledge around. I was interested in the project and did not see any competing initiatives in the works, so I decided that new expert would be me. I set about gathering every bit of information I could find and after a few months of work, put together written materials and a workshop designed to teach analysts how to integrate A of A into their existing process.

5 Because virtually all the products that receive in-depth quality reviews are classified, I unfortunately do not have concrete review data to cite here.
When I began teaching the workshop, I expected the analytic workforce would push back on the new guidance and not be receptive to adding a new dimension to their analysis. I expected a struggle over basic questions like, “why should we do this when we are already so busy?”.

Because I expected such fundamental disagreements with what I was teaching, I included plain-language explanations in the workshop of how and why we could improve our performance without letting any other work suffer. To my surprise, instead of hearing “we are too busy for this and don’t have time,” I found that once our analysts got an in-depth explanation of where to start and what questions to ask, they were able to generate alternative assessments quickly.

Anticipating the basic questions and anxieties they might have helped me address those concerns up front. Instead of having to wrangle them into giving A of A a try, I found instead that they got stuck at another point in the process—ranking their expanded list of hypotheses by likelihood. I viewed this as a good problem because it showed they were able to get further on their own than they expected, and when they got stuck and needed help it was later in the process.

The most important lesson I learned from this is how using the right language and questions for your purpose can provoke the kind of breakthroughs in understanding that open the door to critical thinking. In addition to being a success with the workforce, the A of A project did not cost the agency anything above the salary it was already paying me. The project was driven by my own curiosity and a belief that our analysts had the potential to expand their analytic approaches if they had the right tools and knew how to use them. In this instance, the tools were almost entirely linguistic in nature. We showed them what myths were affecting our collective attitudes about A of A and what facts should replace those myths. Over the course of researching A of A and creating new guidance and training materials, I learned how implicit messaging can easily become a source for myths that become deeply entrenched in organizational culture.
Another important lesson I learned about language and communication is the importance of tone. Although I never said it anywhere explicitly in the workshop or written guidance, I infused my belief that our analysts could master A of A—that it was not a pie-in-the-sky dream but a realistic goal—through all the components of the project. I deliberately managed my audience’s expectations by advising them to measure progress on a crawl-walk-run spectrum.

**Critical Thinking at NGA**

My years as a facilitator shaped my perspective on the skills and dispositions needed for effective intelligence analysis and how critical thinking is viewed at NGA. The second of those has been much harder to deconstruct than the first. Our existing analytic processes and expectations are founded on a couple key assumptions:

1. Everyone involved in process for writing, reviewing, and approving reports for publication possesses the right skills and dispositions for working with others to produce high-quality, forward-leaning analysis.
2. Critical thinking is a fixed skill not significantly affected by situational factors.

Not everyone fully buys into those assumptions or may not buy into these exact versions. But our individual belief in them is ultimately irrelevant because they inform the processes and norms that govern how we interact.

The critical thinking training that most agency employees get comes from two main sources: short (1-5 day), one-time training courses and ‘on the job’ training. The latter equates to adopting the dispositions and assumptions of more senior colleagues. This form of training has much in common with traditions of passing down oral history between generations. (“Oral history,” 2021) But while that method may be appropriate for sharing myths and legends—narratives that focus on central lessons or metaphors—I do not see it as a reliable method for
teaching new analysts how to see the world objectively. The kinds of stories shared through oral traditions also have clearer beginnings and ends. As illustrated by the earlier puzzle metaphor, intelligence analysts must continually grapple with a lack of obvious structure in the stories they follow.

As I settled into my role as a facilitator, I found that I had natural curiosity and stamina for paying attention to how people think. I also started noticing all the ways the phrase *critical thinking* was invoked at NGA and realized it had become kind of a catch-all term that referred to “good analysis.” This is another example of how vague statements presented as ‘guidance’ get lobbed around the workforce, and how unhelpful and distracting the lack of clarity can be. Simply telling your workers to do good analysis can leave them scratching their heads wondering what, exactly, that entails and whether the boss thinks they’ve been doing bad analysis until now.

An even less helpful way I heard the term used was as a veiled criticism of someone else’s perspective. I especially noticed this among employees in formal leadership positions who would say things like “so-and-so needs to *think more critically*”. That statement by itself does not sound so problematic, but the surrounding context usually made it clear that what the speaker really meant was: *this person or team is not doing things the way I think they should be done, and they need to learn how to think my way*. This attitude, coupled with a lack of curiosity about whether more than one valid approach to a problem might exist, left me feeling unconfident that we were on the same page about what critical thinking really is. Instead, it felt like we were constantly talking past each other, and I could not see a clear path to resolving the ambiguity.

**Attempting a Definition**

So, what is critical thinking, anyway? The agency has not issued an official definition that is used to measure performance; instead, we sometimes resort to box-checking exercises to
proclaim we are successful at critical thinking. A debate over making the agency’s basic critical thinking course required for all employees or, more realistically, all employees in analytic work roles, has come and gone over the years. A few years ago, I served as a representative for my office when the National Geospatial-Intelligence College (NGC) began developing an intermediate-level critical thinking course. One day, my collaborators and I were asked to do a data pull of employee records to determine what percentage of the Analysis workforce had already completed the introductory-level critical thinking course. By the way leaders reacted to that data and the comments they made, it became clear that many of them equated completion of a 5-day course with proof that employees now possessed critical thinking skills and were applying them appropriately to their work.

Over the years I’ve come to realize while the specifics of what critical thinking is supposed to look like in action at NGA, there is an unofficial gospel of critical thinking within the IC I can look to for definitions. I came to this conclusion after years of observing how formal and informal conversations around critical thinking inevitably lead back to the same few sources. That list of sources has not been updated in my 12 years in the IC, and I don’t expect to see any new names added in the next 12 years. The IC’s hallowed saints of critical thinking are:

- Richards J. Heuer, best known for the books *Psychology of Intelligence Analysis* and *Structured Analytic Techniques for Intelligence Analysis*; (Heuer, 2021)
- Randolph H. Pherson, who co-authored *Structured Analytic Techniques for Intelligence Analysis* with Richards J. Heuer and has written several other books about critical thinking. He opened a private firm with his wife, Katherine Hibbs Pherson, after they both retired from CIA. Together, they wrote the extremely influential6 book *Critical

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6 I am not being hyperbolic when I call these texts “extremely influential;” there was a time when a hard copy of *Critical Thinking for Strategic Intelligence* was purchased for every analyst at NGA. To put that in perspective, over
Thinking for Strategic Intelligence; (Heuer and Pherson, 2021; Pherson and Pherson, 2012)

- Linda Paul and Charles Elder, academics who founded www.criticalthinking.org. Their work is especially prevalent in NGC course curriculum, especially the elements of thought and intellectual standards. (“Wheel of Reason,” n.d.; “Critical Thinking: Intellectual Standards,” 2013) Notably, Paul and Elder are the only individuals on this list whose expertise was not developed at CIA.

The definition of critical thinking offered in Critical Thinking for Strategic Intelligence is “…the adaptation of the processes and values of scientific inquiry to the special circumstances of strategic intelligence.” (Pherson and Pherson, 2012) Criticalthinking.org offers a few definitions of varying lengths. (“Defining Critical Thinking,” n.d.) I found the following definition aligned most closely with the IC perspective: “Critical thinking is that mode of thinking - about any subject, content, or problem - in which the thinker improves the quality of his or her thinking by skillfully taking charge of the structures inherent in thinking and imposing intellectual standards upon them.”

From these central sources, the prevailing view that has evolved in the IC is that critical thinking is applied in two main ways: by identifying cognitive biases and assumptions and imposing more structure on thinking processes, especially through the use of structured analytic techniques (SATs). Many of these techniques were created by Randolph Pherson and Richards Heuer. (Bruce, 2018; Heuer, 2009)
As a facilitator, I became an effective purveyor of this brand of critical thinking: I dutifully learned how to facilitate SATs, encouraged analysts to take the critical thinking training available to them, and trained new facilitators who joined the team. I wasn’t just going through the motions; I did and still do believe there’s a lot of valuable wisdom in those formative texts. But I also had an increasingly strong gut feeling that we were defining critical thinking too tactically and closing ourselves off to new research and ideas. The tension I felt reminds me of the classic fairytale story archetype in which a young person is discouraged from venturing outside their homeland. Their elders say things like **there’s nothing for you out there** and **why would you want to leave when everything is so great here?** But the main character goes anyway because their curiosity must be quenched.

*Disney’s *The Little Mermaid* is one example of the narrative archetype described above.*

**Introduction to Red Team Concept**

In 2017, I took a course titled ‘Structured Techniques for Alternative Analysis’ at Washington University in St. Louis. The instructor was a former IC tradecraft specialist who had
completed a rotation as DIA’s Devil’s Advocate.\(^7\) One of the main texts we studied in that course was the book *Red Team: How to Succeed By Thinking Like the Enemy.* (Zenko, 2015)

This was my first real exposure to red teaming as a way of thinking and a management strategy for identifying and mitigating organizational risks. My closest frame of reference was CIA’s Red Cell, but I did not know of any other permanent, agency-level teams. (Zenko, “Inside the CIA Red Cell,” 2016)

As I learned from the course and subsequent research I undertook, red teams do the kind of out-of-the-box thinking that does not tend to happen naturally inside hierarchical organizations. This includes raising issues members of the parent organization need to hear but may not want to. Red teams are effective for accomplishing some of the most central tasks in critical thinking: challenging assumptions and generating alternative viewpoints. They look beyond hard evidence to imagine “what if?” scenarios and use role-playing techniques to analyze an organization’s plans and programs from an adversary’s perspective. (Zenko, 2015) Views generated by red teams are intended to challenge both analytic assessments and cultural norms of the organization. (Defense Science Board Task Force, 2003)

A red team’s mission is twofold: first, they must be alert to potential risks so they can warn others; second, they must be able to explain what organizational factors created those risks. This kind of critical reflection helps an organization become more honest about its biases and blind spots and avoid falling into complacency. Complacency is often at the root of business failures and organizational dysfunction. Red teamers act as analytic lifeguards: keeping an eye

\(^7\) There are no mentions of this position on DIA’s unclassified website, [www.dia.mil](http://www.dia.mil), which means I unfortunately cannot show you hard proof of its existence. My instructor describes the role as, “the agency's senior methodological expert on contrarian structured analytic techniques, authored authoritative tradecraft primer on alternative analysis and led working groups, brainstorms and analytic reviews that questioned assumptions, challenged conventional wisdom, emulated the adversary or asked ‘what if?’” on her LinkedIn profile. (Craig, n.d.)
on swimmers who may have wandered farther out to sea than they realize or have failed to notice
danger lurking nearby.

A red team is most effective when it has support at the senior-most levels of an
organization but operates somewhat independently. (Zenko, 2015; Defense Science Board Task
Force, 2003) A mix of independence and accountability ensures that the team’s efforts remain
focused on organizational priorities but their work is not skewed by office politics. One benefit
of red teaming is it can speed up the process of tradecraft development by identifying and
resolving problems while they are still manageable in scope, before they can evolve into
intelligence failures. It takes the focus of critical self-reflection from postmortem to premortem,
asking what assumptions are creating blind spots before a scenario has fully played out rather
than after.

I saw NGA’s hierarchical dynamic represented in the description of the kinds of
organizations least likely to detect and respond to risks. (Zenko, 2015) One particular reason I
saw NGA as a good candidate for a permanent red team was because we had no tradition of
dissent or considering alternative viewpoints on internal plans and initiatives. Our way of
thinking, even when we applied our trusted critical thinking tools (mostly SATs), was still too
inherently defensive. After my success teaching the analytic workforce how to consider
alternative analyses more regularly, I was on the lookout for other ways I could sharpen our
organizational thinking, either individually or as part of a group.

I ultimately did not complete the degree program I had started at Washington University;
aside from the course where I learned about red teaming, the program did not have the direct
focus on critical thinking I was looking for. I researched online whether there were any masters
programs in the US where I could get a degree in critical thinking and found UMass Boston. I
applied for an agency fellowship that would pay my tuition and allow me to enroll in school full time. While I waited to hear back about my application, I continued working as a facilitator and began pitching the idea of an NGA red team to anyone in my leadership chain who would agree to meet with me about it.

**Socializing the Idea**

Over the next year, I delivered and refined my pitch for an NGA red team to peers and leaders around the agency. Some conversations were targeted toward specific leaders whose support we needed based on where they sit in the management hierarchy. I also spoke to many of my peers to get their feedback on my arguments and also plant the idea in their heads of what a GEOINT red team could bring to NGA. Regardless the level of formality in each conversation, almost everyone I spoke to started from the same place: struggling to get past the impression that red teaming was “a CIA thing” and could not be done anywhere else. They were so stuck on worrying about whether CIA would be offended if we started our own red team that they could not even consider what value that kind of thinking can bring to an organization. Their perspective seemed to be: *this one agency has successfully carved out a niche for a red team presence and they now own the concept*. I took the opposite stance; I saw the Red Cell’s long-term impact as an argument for our establishing our own team rather than an argument against. As long as CIA’s team remained the only one of its kind, insightful out-of-the-box analysis would remain limited to only one intelligence discipline (human intelligence). I felt NGA’s culture of timidity was holding us back from exploring what could happen if there were more red teams in the DoD who could collaborate on creative products and analysis. After gaining my
division chief’s support for an NGA red team, he arranged a meeting for us with the chief of the Red Cell. The chief was very supportive of our plan and loved the idea of collaborating on products in the future. His buy-in was a crucial piece I needed to convince stakeholders within NGA that I was not a heretic for claiming NGA could have its own red team.

After convincing my leadership that red teaming was a way of thinking and a management tool any organization could adopt, they also needed to be convinced that we had the right talent within our workforce to staff a team. I believed there were already great candidates hiding in plain sight, and we only needed to recruit them and let them loose on a new task. My own career arc was a testimony to how much an employee can achieve when they have psychological safety and a good question to investigate. I looked at my personal network and identified individuals who already possessed the traits of good red teamers that are outlined in Micah Zenko’s book. (Zenko, 2015) Of all the conversations I have had about red teaming in the past few years, these were the most rewarding and memorable by a long shot. I had the privilege of witnessing lifelong personal narratives get reframed.

The combination of traits that make someone a good red teamer translate into the personalities that get labeled as ‘oddball’ or ‘black sheep’ in mainstream American culture. The best red teamers are honest even when honesty does not directly benefit them; they are the opposite of people pleasers. They tend to be more intrinsically than extrinsically motivated and develop deep expertise in topics that interest them.⁹ Good red teamers are not usually concerned

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⁹ Although Micah Zenko does not say this explicitly in his book, I deduced from the description of the best red teamers and my experience of being a woman in 21st century America that it is easier to find men who fit the criteria, because our society is more tolerant of men having the characteristics that make a good red teamer. These traits are not encouraged or, in many contexts, tolerated in women because of societal expectations that they be more agreeable and polite than men. Although I have no way of proving this, I strongly suspect that most extant red teams are male-dominated. With one exception (my instructor at Washington University), every other person I have spoken to with red team experience was male. These people include: the Red Cell chief, a special unit I met with at the Pentagon (12-15 team members, all male), and an Army officer I spoke to on the phone.
with climbing the career ladder—in fact, career climbers often make the worst red teamers because management types are more likely to revert to status quo thinking that protects the organization they serve. (Zenko, 2015)

While digesting this list of traits I was looking for, I realized that I checked a lot of the boxes and that personal connection may have helped me quickly grasp the value and mechanics of red teaming. I was also familiar with the cognitive dissonance that comes from knowing some of the traits that define your intellect can put you at odds with other people. It’s a tough tightrope to walk.

The individuals I sought out were used to being told that they were strange, didn’t think or act like other people, and needed to go with the flow more. Instead of telling them their natural personalities were somehow wrong, instead they heard—many for the first time in their lives—they were not wrong at all, there was a different label that applied to them: natural red teamer. The traits that set them apart were incredibly valuable and underutilized. It’s hard to put into words the expressions of relief and pain I saw flash across their faces. They were not all exactly the same, but we had the shared experience of feeling like we needed to suppress core traits for the sake of fitting in. One way I described the red teamer personality to my management chain

To make my proposal more persuasive, I researched other examples of red team-like groups within the DoD and military. Over time I was able to demonstrate that not only was red teaming a construct that could be applied in a wide variety of situations, but it was also a concept that had been recommended for more widespread adoption years before. A DoD report published about red team training. My takeaway is that I need to keep an eye out for young female NGA employees I can cultivate as future red teamers. Otherwise, we might end up with a red team that is too homogenous to be truly effective.
around the time of the Iraq invasion noted that, “transforming the capabilities of an organization requires adept use of the tools of management.” (Defense Science Board Task Force, 2003) One such management tool is the practice of red teaming, which the memo recommended adopting more widely across the community. Red teaming encompasses a variety of activities designed to uncover an organization’s assumptions, vulnerabilities, and cultural norms. Red teaming allows institutions to get a, “fresh and alternative perspective on how they do things.” (Zenko, 2015) Red teaming is standard practice across the US military and in certain corners of the Intelligence Community, but NGA has never committed the proper resources for establishing its own team nor investigated how red team thinking could benefit GEOINT analysis. While NGA’s existing office structure promotes evaluation of concrete evidence, i.e. looking at what’s there, it does not reliably consider what’s possible or analyze potential blind spots. The existing office structure also does not generate many dissenting viewpoints, a problem that is common across large organizations. (Zenko, 2015)

Red teams do the kind of out-of-the-box thinking that does not tend to happen naturally inside hierarchical organizations. This includes raising issues members of the parent organization need to hear, but may not want to. Red teams are effective for accomplishing some of the most central tasks in critical thinking: challenging assumptions and generating alternative viewpoints. They look beyond hard evidence to imagine “what if?” scenarios and use role-playing techniques to analyze an organization’s plans and programs from an adversary’s perspective. (Zenko, 2015) Views generated by red teams are intended to challenge both analytic assessments and cultural norms of the organization. (Defense Science Board Task Force, 2003)

A red team’s mission is twofold: first, they must be alert to potential risks so they can warn others; second, they must be able to explain what organizational factors created those risks.
This kind of critical reflection helps an organization become more honest about its biases and blind spots and avoid falling into complacency. Complacency is often at the root of business failures and organizational dysfunction. Red teamers act as analytic lifeguards: keeping an eye on swimmers who may have wandered farther out to sea than they realize or have failed to notice danger lurking nearby.

A red team is most effective when it has support at the senior-most levels of an organization but operates somewhat independently. (Zenko, 2015; (Defense Science Board Task Force, 2003) A mix of independence and accountability ensures that the team’s efforts remain focused on organizational priorities but their work is not skewed by office politics. One benefit of red teaming is it can speed up the process of tradecraft development by identifying and resolving problems while they are still manageable in scope, before they can evolve into intelligence failures. It takes the focus of critical self-reflection from postmortem to premortem, asking what assumptions are creating blind spots before a scenario has fully played out rather than after.

**Honing My Perspective**

In 2019, I started the CCT program at UMass. I was exposed to a much wider range of sources on critical thinking, just as I had hoped, and my personal definition broadened as a result. I gradually moved toward a clearer understanding of the shift I wanted to create at NGA: a move from defensive to offensive thinking. (Grant, 2016) I knew the workforce was capable of it under the right conditions. I had experienced the shift myself and tried to encourage it in others whenever I had the chance. But I also saw how often critical thinking could be interrupted or aborted by micromanagement, fear of honesty, a putting consensus on a pedestal as the end-all,
be-all of every conversation. This is not to say that everyone at NGA thinks only defensively, all
the time. But when offensive thinking happens, it’s usually on a small scale or it happens behind
closed doors instead of out in the open. At an organizational level, defensive thinking reigns.

Official Approval and a Team Name

In Fall 2020, my boss Kevin and I received the approvals we needed to officially begin
preparing for a team. The timeline needed to get administrative pieces in place conveniently
aligned with my timeline for completing the CCT program. Although I had originally asked for a
team of six employees, my office leadership agreed to secure four billets.10 I felt this was the
minimum we could function with on a virtual team, because it allowed us to have a pair of two
employees at both of our headquarters. I hoped that if we proved valuable over time we might be
able to expand beyond just four employees later. Other administrative decisions were made
based on either what was most logical and realistic for my office to support:

◊ The four team positions will be evenly split between the Virginia headquarters and
   western headquarters in St. Louis (my work location).
◊ The team will be managed by my then-division chief, Kevin.
◊ The team positions will comprise two band-3 billets and two band-4 billets. This means
   our potential pool of applicants will be mostly mid-career employees with at least a few
   years’ experience working in the agency, but little if any formal management experience.
   We can expect that all applicants will have worked in at least one team environment and
   be familiar with the hierarchical dynamics and analytic culture of NGA.

10 This is the administrative term used to communicate a role or position has become “real,” i.e. it exists on an org
chart. The military also uses this term. The closest real-world equivalent is line item. Billets are line items that
represent employees. How billets actually work is a secret language only taught to managers; as a non-manager, I
have not been trained in this dark art.
Other than finding out how big the team would be, the next most important task was deciding on a name for it so we could begin carving out an identity for our new unit. Figuring out a unique identity and name is not just for aesthetic purposes; it also helps us avoid being viewed as a poor imitation of CIA’s Red Cell. One of our main inspirations during this period was the movie Spotlight. (Spotlight, 2015) Kevin and I drew inspiration from the Boston Globe’s investigative unit for ideas about how our red team could operate and retain its independence inside a larger organization. We appreciated how the name Spotlight was striking, memorable, and had a metaphorical connection to the work the team did. After brainstorming and considering dozens of options, Kevin and I decided to name our red team Counterpoint.

**Lessons About What Not To Do**

Throughout the process of learning about red teams and envisioning how one could function at NGA, it has been easier to determine what we should not do than what we should do. Micah Zenko’s book includes a lot of helpful tips gleaned from teams across different industries. But there is no gold standard for how a red team should function, because in order to be effective a red team must be custom-built to serve the specific needs of its parent organization. (Zenko, 2015) That message should probably be emblazoned at the top of the DON’T list for setting up a red team: *don’t copy another organization’s red team structure or operating norms and expect them to work in your organization.*

Even though I could not copy another team’s structure entirely, I was not starting entirely from scratch either. There had been a short-lived attempt to establish a red team presence at NGA in 2011, when an employee became invested in the concept like I had and asked his management for permission to explore it more in-depth. He devoted himself to it for the better
part of a year until he changed jobs, after which the effort was abandoned rather than passed on to another employee. I met with this employee, who is now a division-level manager, about his experience and what he learned along the way. He expressed enthusiastic support for my effort, and I left our conversation with these takeaways:

◊ **An initiative must be properly resourced for it to have long-term organizational value.** This is perhaps the main reason the red team concept didn’t ‘stick’ at NGA the first time, and why I fought to have a team instead of being assigned to it by myself. One person is simply not enough to support this kind of thinking in an organization as large as NGA. As demonstrated in my attempt to secure billets for a full team, however, it can be difficult to convince decision makers to cut resources from other teams—especially if you’re asking for a team whose primary focus will be internal instead of external (customer-facing).

◊ **Any role or responsibility is more likely to disappear if it is too closely connected to a personality—i.e., described as “so-and-so’s project”—rather than defined by its function or service to the larger organization.** This also contributed to the concept essentially vanishing from the agency when lone red teamer moved jobs. His management treated the effort as his pet project. Some projects that start this way do make the transition to being taken more seriously, but it’s big hump to get over. Putting all the responsibility on one employee for proving a concept can work and providing no other support, tangible or intangible, almost ends the way it did in this case: the idea can’t make the leap from being “so-and-so’s project” to something else and fails to get traction.

◊ **Although a period of research and planning may be necessary when a new function is added to an organization, basic goals and expectations are necessary.** From my
discussion with the employee, I got the sense that for the entire time he spent working on this project, his management did not work with him to establish any goals or expectations. I don’t even think his role was given a name, which would have been a good starting point for building momentum. Because he was trying to learn how to do something that had never been done at the agency before, he needed space to research and develop plans. But he also needed accountability and a feedback loop to help determine if he was headed in the right direction. Autonomy is a needed for building trust between workers and managers, but too much autonomy can become a form of neglect. (Zak, 2019) Even though the employee needed flexibility to explore avenues of research and engagement, having absolute freedom in the form of zero expectations was counterproductive. It left him operating in a vacuum and contributed to his effort being abandoned as quickly as it had been initiated.

The employee expressed enthusiastic support for my nascent team and sent me all the files he had compiled during his time as a red team of one. Although his story can serve as a cautionary tale, it is not an anomalous experience. Many other well-intentioned projects have died similar deaths. On the one hand, the kind of agreement between employee and manager he had does have some practical benefits: allowing an employee to explore a concept for possible wider implementation is one way the agency can test out ideas without committing much up front. It helps avoid wasted resources or potentially embarrassing investigations down the road if it turns out a concept is not suitable for wider implementation. But letting good ideas languish as personal pet projects has potential consequences that are just as great, if not greater: good ideas not only become lost, but are unfairly labeled as “failures” and future generations of employees are deterred from putting any stock in them; rifts can develop between employees who worked
on a project and managers who opted not to provide support and resources; and even the best employees can become cynical and disengaged when their hard work and emotional investment does not pan out the way they envisioned. These forces intersect to create a culture in which generating creative ideas is discouraged. Where there are no rewards for creativity or innovation, workers’ inquiry skills go dormant. (Grant, 2016) This reinforces a culture of defensive thinking.

**Realizing the Importance of Teamwork**

Imagining how our future red team could or should operate spurred a lot of reflection about all the team dynamics I had witnessed over the years. Aside from the constant awareness of hierarchical relationships, the other defining characteristic of teamwork at NGA is how much we take it for granted. We view it as the natural and inevitable way that work will get done; beyond that, we tend not to give it much thought until a team breaks down. Then we go into fix-it mode, trying to find ways to quickly patch up problems that in many cases have been simmering for a while. But we waited until the situation boiled over, because we think we’re either too busy to address a problem while it’s still simmering or don’t believe in the value of doing so. We expect our teams to operate as smoothly as a well-maintained luxury car, but we don’t do the maintenance needed to keep it running. I started to see parallels between the complacency we show toward team dynamics and how we treat risk at NGA. And I realized that the deep structure of a problem like teams being so neglected as systems that they can break down is the kind of problem structure a red team should look for: risks created as byproducts of a larger system that tend to go unnoticed until they escalate into much bigger problems. (Meadows, 2008) I wanted to believe it was possible to build a strong team that would function well as a unit, instead of as a collection of smart individuals. I had never seen this done deliberately at NGA, so again I began with lessons about what not to do.
The Moneyball Method of Team building

The default mode of staffing teams at NGA is treating them like linear equations: plugging in X employees with Y skills to get Z desired outcome. At least two related, key assumptions underlie this approach: first, that group output is the direct sum of a team’s knowledge and skills; and second, that anyone smart enough to work at NGA already knows how to effectively work in a team environment. I have come to think of this as the Moneyball approach, which refers to an application of a philosophy called sabermetrics made famous by a book and subsequent film on the subject, both titled Moneyball. (“Sabermetrics,” 2021) The central narrative of Moneyball is a roguish MLB manager, Billy Beane, who eschews recommendations from traditional baseball scouts to recruit players through a more data-driven approach. Two key factors are most important: player salary requirements relative to Beane’s budget, and whether they have specific skillsets the team is currently lacking. The traditional scouts also look at players’ skillsets when making recommendations, but their approach is less granular and objective. They rely mostly on their eyes and instincts to alert them to the best all-around players, driven by the belief that individual superstars lead teams to success. (Lewis, 2004)

It’s an inspiring story of going against conventional wisdom, but it hasn’t given NGA better teams or long-term success.11 Because intelligence analysis is not baseball. Baseball (and any mainstream sport, really) has more in common with the conventional jigsaw from my earlier metaphor. The goal of baseball is finite and never changes; success comes from completing an

11 Furthermore, Sabermetrics has not proven effective long-term in the original domain where it was developed. More specifically, it has not given poorer teams the leg up Billy Beane hoped would put them on par with more dominant, dynastic teams. Building a winning team depends on other, more powerful factors than recruitment practices; the ultimate legacy of Moneyball may be that it indirectly brought some of those factors to the attention of a wider audience.
established set of tasks before your opponent does. It requires agility and panache, but the basic structure of it does not change. There’s an extensive rulebook that governs play and field conditions. Trained referees monitor every aspect of every game. The main parallel between baseball and NGA is the presence of teams. Not much else carries over.

(“Baseball,” 2021)

What We Should Do Instead

My overall hope is that adding this new component to the agency will both surface organizational risks so they can be handled appropriately and model for the workforce different ways of thinking in a hierarchical organization. Because the positions on the team are all rotational, the Counterpoint disposition will get circulated throughout the workforce over time. This rotational model is one the facilitation team adopted to address staffing issues; it is much easier to add temporary or rotational positions to a team than permanent ones. Making a large portion of the team’s positions rotational yielded additional benefits by regularly refreshing the group with new talent and spreading facilitation tradecraft throughout the analytic workforce; I expect the same could happen for Counterpoint.
Break New Ground

In *Red Team*, Micah Zenko argues that genuine alternative analysis cannot be generated by the same tools used for traditional or mainstream analysis. (Zenko, 2015) Employing the same tools and hoping for different results can, at best, result in scenarios that are slight variations on a central theme. They do not challenge us enough to think differently enough and can actually create overconfidence by presenting a false image of analytic rigor. The Counterpoint team must experiment with new tools and approaches not commonly used at NGA.

Intentionally Build Up Team Culture

Another way in which Counterpoint can break new ground is by trying a different approach to team building. I believe that a positive working environment can be a huge asset to any team, but it is especially essential for Counterpoint’s success and stability given our unique situation: our mission will inevitably require us to be the bearers of bad news to leaders who are not used to receiving honesty from employees who rank below them. We need to be a strong unit so we can support each other when we are treated with suspicion or doubt by people outside the team. The story development team experienced this in those first two years when we operated like traveling salesmen, but the positive team environment helped us cope with the stress of being treated with disdain. I don’t know exactly what kind of reactions Counterpoint’s work will garner, but it’s safe to assume there will be plenty of negative reviews. The presence of psychological safety, shared norms, and a clear vision will help the team handle potential blowback with confidence and calm. (West, 2012)

Establish Our Own Norms

When Google set out to study patterns that distinguish good teams from bad teams, they found that group norms had the biggest influence on how well a team worked together—not
personality types, or how much teammates socialized together outside work, or any of the other patterns the researchers expected to find. (Duhigg, 2016) The combination of skillsets on a team also was not a strong predictor of performance. Of all the different dimensions Google’s researchers looked at, they found surprisingly few identifiable patterns. Though they extracted group norms as a strong influence on good teams, the norms were not consistent across those teams. This implies that there is no single golden standard for effective group norms; they must be custom-built to suit the team’s purpose. What mattered most was that the norms were clear to everyone on the team and followed consistently. If my over-arching goal is to make Counterpoint a place where offensive thinking can flourish, our norms must fit that purpose.

Norms are the standards by which we operate and interact; they could also be described as tangible pieces of culture. When something feels awkward or inherently ‘wrong’ against its surrounding context, that feeling can come from a norm being violated. As mentioned before, Google’s researchers did not find one set of productive group norms across their best teams. A different set seemed to work for each team. There was only one norm seen consistently across the good teams: conversational turn-taking. On good teams, everyone spoke approximately the same amount. (Duhigg, 2016) This practice helps teams maintain a collaborative approach and prevents individuals from either dominating conversations or receding from view.

Protect Team Culture

One habit I would like to instill in Counterpoint is treating our team culture as if it were the fifth member of our team rather than an invisible, undefinable force. I already pay attention to my colleagues’ mental and emotional health; the strength of our commitment our shared norms and vision should get just as much care and attention. I believe the main switch I need to make is monitoring the emotional pulse of the team and view it as an important barometer for
how the team is doing. (Barsade and O’Neill, 2016) The default mindset about emotional pulse is
that it is separate and unrelated from the quality of the work employees produce. I believe that is
simply untrue and paying attention to it more closely may be a path toward cultivating and
maintaining even stronger work relationships.

Principles

Below are some core principles I hope will help the team begin defining its vision and
culture. I have titled them principles instead of core values because the latter are often vague and
hard to quantify. These principles overlap with common core values in many ways, but I strove
to make them more specific so they could be used as mantras and help guide our decision-
making. I view this list as merely a starting point and hope the team will modify and add to them
as we explore our niche.

Run your own race.

Earlier I described how rewarding it was to work on a great team. Then and now, I
believed the balance of supporting and challenging each other was key to helping us thrive as
individuals and as a unit. (West, 2012) I’ve been trying ever since then to figure out how that
dynamic can be recreated. Unfortunately, this version of the story is incomplete. I stayed on the
team a few more years and saw first-hand how much culture can devolve over time, even when
the mission stays the same. When left unchecked, a negative culture can end up driving strategy
rather than the other way around. (Katzenbach et al, 2019) The warm, creative dynamic of the
original story development team was replaced by one of competitive tension and suspicion. I
stayed on the team because I loved the job, but it got progressively harder to do that job well
because the support and constructive feedback I was used to were replaced by nitpicking and
cliquishness. That dynamic left me dangerously burnt out by the time I departed for school in
Fall 2019, and it’s taken me almost two years to feel emotionally ready to go back to the office.

What happened? How did such a fun, positive work environment become the exact
opposite right under my nose? Our hiring methods did not drastically change between when the
first group and subsequent facilitators were selected. The Moneyball method had failed us: we
assumed we could continue staffing the team with smart, motivated employees and they would
intuitively know how to work well together. Now with the benefit of hindsight, I see this
example of cultural erosion as a lesson in what can happen when no deliberate effort is made to
cultivate or protect a healthy organizational culture, leaving us to rely on default ways of
operating: emphasizing politeness over candor; letting team culture be driven by the most
dominant personalities present; not teaching employees reliable methods for working together
when they don’t get along.

When I attempted to refine this experience down to a simple, usable lesson, what came to
the surface is how much of that behavior was driven by a shift in teammates’ attitudes toward
each other. The supportive but intellectually challenging culture of the original team reminds me
of a common mantra used by runners and endurance athletes: run your own race. In the first
group, we were able to support and provide constructive feedback to each other because we were
running our own individual races. We did not treat each other as competitors to be beaten.

Over time, opportunities for personal success came to be treated like a finite good such as
cake. The subtext was that there were fewer pieces of the success cake than the number of people
on the team, so we needed to battle it out if we wanted a slice. When opportunities to give
briefings or work on special projects were up for grabs, instead of looking around and asking,
“Who would be the best fit for this project? Who needs this growth opportunity the most?” the dominant voices in the new, more negative team pushed for assigning tasks according to their subjective criteria of who was most worthy at that time.

Viewing work as a competition between coworkers harms our capacity to think critically and creatively in a couple of ways. First, it causes oversimplification and avoids inquiry. In a simple race, competitors begin at an equal starting point. In life, we are perpetually at different points in our personal journeys, even if we run side-by-side along some stretches. None of us follows the exact same path as anyone else. Our paths may not even intersect at all. If we view coworkers as competitors, we tacitly accept some huge assumptions about each other’s goals, motivations, and talents. Maintaining an antagonistic attitude toward coworkers also causes us to miss out on opportunities to learn from each other. If you notice a coworker having the kind of success you regard as ‘winning’ and you focus only on the perceived gap between you, your mind is more likely to be closed to questions like, “what are they doing to achieve that success? What could I learn from their approach?”
Another way competitive attitudes can shut out critical and creative thinking in the workplace is by focusing our attention on extrinsic measures of success. Having a strong locus of internal evaluation—the capacity for setting intrinsic and measuring one’s progress toward them—is a fundamental condition for creativity and critical thinking. (Rogers, 1954) Having a strong internal locus is more productive than relying only on extrinsic motivations because it helps us connect to our innermost thoughts and knowledge and autonomously decide what to share.

**Success is not pie.**

Metaphors are commonly used to compare similar structures in life so we can make sense of them easier. But they can be equally helpful in clarifying through contrast and illustrating what something is not. Such is the case for how I think we should view goal-setting and success on the Counterpoint team. Treating success like a pie not only assumes there is a finite amount to be divvied up, but also implies the existence of a perfected recipe we can follow. You can choose
to either make the pie at home by following the recipe yourself or buy it already finished from a store.

An instinct for wanting cognitive closure may cause the Counterpoint team to instinctively look for or adopt our version of a store-bought pie: a “recipe” for success that someone else perfected and then executed. But what got them to their finish line will not get us where we need to go. We cannot do a quick google search for a recipe, buy the listed ingredients, and follow instructions. We have to figure out for ourselves what ingredients we need, how to get them, and what effect is created when they are combined in varying quantities. The key difference here is discovery. The absence of clear, easy-to-follow instructions may feel at certain points like a weakness. But it also sets the stage for new discoveries to take place if we are willing to commit to the process.

Honesty is a form of loyalty.

One of my biggest pet peeves is how the phrase ‘speak truth to power’ has been coopted to describe fairly mundane expressions of honesty directed toward one’s superiors. I do not see the agency as a directly oppressive or authoritarian system, which would be a more appropriate scenario for using the term. (“Speaking truth to power,” 2021) Rather, I think NGA culture is one of complacency, where honest feedback and opinions are not expressed as often as they should be because there are no immediate consequences for staying silent. A harsher way of describing it is as a culture of cowardice, but I don’t think that cowardice is being imposed from the top of the organization. Most everyone is willfully engaging in it, possibly because it appears as a path of least resistance. I think it’s been adopted as a widespread coping mechanism over
time and been held in place by the misguided belief that loyalty requires staying silent. I am not sure where this idea came from, but I’ve seen it expressed in countless big and small ways. It may be an old-fashioned military attitude that we got stuck with.

The perspective I hold on honesty that I hope to spread through the work of Counterpoint, is that it should not be viewed as the antithesis of loyalty. Fear of honesty is really fear of hurt feelings, which implies that honesty can only hurt. This is not true and is not a good enough reason to limit our expressions of honesty in the workplace. The real value of honesty is relevant to the work of Counterpoint because we will be expressing it for the sake of protecting the agency. Identifying risks and blind spots that could cause harm to the agency or its employees is merely supporting the mission from another direction. An apt comparison is when a family stages an intervention over a loved one’s behavior. The purpose of an intervention is not to make the person feel bad, although that may be a byproduct of owning up to their behavior. Interventions are a process by which family and friends use honesty to alert the central person to their vulnerable state, and the risk of it becoming worse if immediate action is not taken.

**Make friends with tension.**

Tension is another force instinctively avoided at NGA because it is viewed in only negative terms. But tension is also the catalyst for creativity, problem-solving, and question-forming. The secret is knowing how to identify and create productive tension. Soliciting problems from the workforce instead of only solutions is one method of creating productive tension. Prompting workers to look for problems also promotes inquiry, which is a fundamental condition for critical thinking to take place. (Grant, 2016) The Counterpoint team must become accustomed to turning toward tension instead of away, as we’ve been taught to do. Where there is great unresolved tension there may be systemic weaknesses or risks in need of probing.
We are not our points of view.

Humans tend to focus too much on what our beliefs are instead of why they are what they are. Where do they come from? What influenced their development and how have they changed over time? (Kida, 2006) Beliefs are subjective opinions and shift naturally over time as we acquire more life experiences. But if we do not think of our perspectives this way, it is easy to let them subsume our whole identities. (Senge, 1990) The ability to separate personal identity from beliefs is an important aspect of a critical thinking disposition that the Counterpoint team must model for the workforce. (Barsade and O’Neill, 2016) Within the team, we should also hold each other accountable and speak up when we notice one of our members becoming overly defensive about personal views.

Learn together.

Adopting more offensive ways of thinking is merely a means to an end. The ultimate goal of Counterpoint and my work as a tradecraft specialist is helping the agency adopt a more learning-oriented organizational disposition. Learning organizations are defined by people who continually renew their ability to learn together. It is this disposition and commitment to the effort it takes to learn together that makes them successful, not getting to a fixed point and declaring victory. (Senge, 1990) Great teams develop over time rather than becoming instantly great by putting individual high-performers together in the same space. Teams become great when their members learn how to work together effectively and play off each other’s strengths. This principle will, I hope, remind us not to become so focused on our individual learning that we become blind to the team’s collective knowledge.
**Work with what you have.**

I draw a few different interpretations from this statement, and am interested to hear additional ways my teammates read into it:

- Keep your eyes open to the people and resources around you as assets than can be tapped into rather than distractions and roadblocks.
- Trust yourself and your team to come up with good ideas. Don’t expect them to always come from the outside.
- Pay attention to what’s happening in front of you.
- Look out for ruts that may develop in your thinking based on your perceived lack of something: knowledge, access, support, etc. Especially if you find yourself stalling, do an inventory of what you do have to work with. This will often help you get moving again.
- Be open to tailoring short-term goals and plans to fit the talent and bandwidth of the team. The specific outcomes this team will produce are yet to be determined—that gives us a unique opportunity to use our combined skills and knowledge in creative ways. Traditionally, goals and strategies are laid out before employees are chosen to fulfill them. What would happen if moved in the opposite direction when designing our plans and asked: *how can we create the most value for the agency with the people we have right now?*

**Conclusion**

Looking back on what I learned from my research and reflection, it’s clearer to me now what big lesson I was building up toward. What makes so many tasks challenging is the balance of flexibility and control needed. That balance cannot be achieved without first considering what aspects of a task require more flexibility or more control, so you know where to apply the
appropriate kind of effort. Believing those answers will always be obvious and easy to arrive at is one way we develop ruts in our thinking instead of trying new approaches.

This question of what aspects of Counterpoint should I try to control, and what should I allow to develop naturally? was a big one that has plagued me ever since we received approval to move forward and set up a team. What I discovered along the way is that the areas where I felt pressured to exert more control—dictating plans, strategies, and actions before knowing who would be on the team—are actually areas where I need to remain flexible at this early stage. The aspects of team building that needed more deliberate care and attention were the ones that have been perpetually taken for granted in my workplace. Pushing back on the typical NGA way of establishing a new team may have been my first real practice in being a professional red teamer and makes me feel more confident about leading the Counterpoint team. I experienced a lot of doubt along the way, especially about whether my realizations were ‘big’ enough to make an impact. I expect that’s exactly the kind of internal tension I will become well-acquainted with on the road ahead.
REFERENCES


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