

Terrorism, Networking, and Leadership

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A small rogue state confronts a superpower. This rogue state, outnumbered by at least one hundred to one in vital military equipment, crafts just four individual weapons of superior strength. By training effectively, relying on a value-based approach to management, and with some luck, the rogue state forces the superpower to capitulate. Is this:

- The likely end-game for the US in Iraq?
- Israel versus Syria?
- A good description of an effective terrorist approach (e.g., airplanes as gasoline bombs)
- Something else all together?

Well, it may describe a possible ending to the current Iraqi conflict, or Israel versus Syria, or a variety of terrorist groups' current strategy, but in fact it describes the United States of America and its fight with the British during the war of 1812.

As described in C.S. Forester's excellent little book, *The Age of Fighting Sail*:

"It can hardly be overstressed that the huge construction and reconstruction programs undertaken by the British government were the result of the employment by the United States of only three large frigates, which might have been thought scarcely to merit the attention of a navy with over a hundred ships of line actually at sea."

How could such a small force have such a high impact? John Robb, in his new book, *Brave New War: The Next Stage of Terrorism and the End of Globalization*, provides a possible answer. As he explains, the original US approach to winning the war in Iraq and its result was a classic example of what the US military now calls "effect-based operations." The notion, as one US general put it, "was whether the electrical system (in this case) was operating in the area of interest, not the level of damage or lack thereof to an individual site." That is to say, the US intent was not to try to knock out the entire electrical system (even with America's superior fire power), but rather to only knock out

enough to temporarily shut down the grid, and thus save most of it for after the war, one of the few apparently "planful" steps taken by DOD during that period.

Two interesting examples of the same phenomenon and its relationship to terrorism are provided in a recent Newsweek piece on the inability of the US to find Osama Bin Laden.

The first example relates to Bin Laden's deployment of small groups of his bodyguards along the Afghan frontier. Since they have the same "signature" (that is, they are all small, constantly moving, use the same vehicles, etc., as Bin Laden himself), the US military finds it necessary to spread its resources thinly on the chance that the activities on one such group actually will involve moving Bin Laden. This is a good case of an opponent using effects-based operations to its own advantage.

The second example shows how unintended consequences result from incomplete thinking about network effects. In this case, the US military has emphasized body counts in the on-going military efforts in Afghanistan. But this is actually counter-productive, in that, given the tribal culture at work in that country, when you kill a person, *all* of their relatives must join the fight to avenge that death.

In effect, this is an example of "reverse effect-based operations" – our efforts and incentives actually create *more* fighters from a given action rather than fewer!

Robb goes on to look at today's complex organizations, their vulnerabilities, and a possible way of coping with terrorist attacks. His thoughts are instructive for today's leaders as they attempt to cope with the increased complexity and risk associated with expanding geography, products, markets, employee diversity, generational differences in the work force, and sheer size.

He argues that, in the face of terrorism, systems must be made less "brittle" and more robust. He postulates three dimensions of such robustness: two-way, transparent, and open.

It is instructive to look at each of these dimensions as Robb sees them, and as they apply to leadership of modern organizations in general.

Two-Way

In one of his examples, Robb argues that in order for the electrical grids of the future to be more resilient, they must be (like networks in general) capable of moving value (in this case electrons) both ways. That is, such grids need to have power plants, but they should have *thousands* of such plants, not a few. Every homeowner should have the opportunity to make an economic decision (based on the government changing the incentives for providing power) as to whether it is not worthwhile to invest in making power for themselves and others. Fortunately, in this case technology is also moving to assist such efforts, in everything from hydrogen cells to more "home-sized" photovoltaic energy generators.

If one thinks of "leadership" less as a hierarchal activity done "to" someone, and more of a means of an organization working together to find the right path, then Robb's analogy is extremely useful. Think of a community of army ants. As described in Michael Maboussin's book, *More Than You Know*, army ants are not only not very smart, but they are also nearly blind. Yet they have survived for thousands of years. Why? Because they work together in a "swarm" and the "intelligence" of that swarm is what gives them the power to survive. Similarly, elk herds, flocks of birds, and many other examples of "swarms" demonstrate that collective intelligence and leadership can be many times that of the intelligence and leadership of single individuals in the "swarm." *The Wisdom of Crowds* by James Surowiecki poses a parallel notion of a large number of people operating independently having a better chance of being right than a single individual. But it is important that there be diversity in that number of people.

In fact, our friends the army ants sometimes so blindly follow each other that they literally march around in circles, until a group of the ants with a more diverse make-up than most of the others, take a slightly different path and get the whole army back on track.

Transparent

In the above example, a homeowner will not make an investment in electrical generation if he does not see what his likely costs are versus other sources, and if he can actually sell electricity to help pay for his own.

If you want to apply this to leadership, think

about everything from setting clear expectations for subordinates, to having conversations with your boss when she is absolutely clear about where you have been effective and where not. Transparency often gets short shrift, but is enormously important.

Open

Similarly, the system must be "open," so that one can actually provide power without the hassle that sometimes occurs today with, for example, solar or wind power and the reluctance of power companies to truly make it easy for individual producers to "get on the grid." Conversely, of course, incentives must be provided so that the power provided is "clean," that is without fluctuations, and with the right power levels and perhaps an appropriate environmental footprint.

Applied to leadership, openness implies grasping the option to actually improve your situation and that of the organization itself. Think how many times you have seen a colleague frustrated because they could not solve a problem because, "that is not the way we do things around here," or "we have to wait for approval on something like that," or more insidiously, the "I'll get back to you on that . . ." line. In every one of these cases, the initiative to take some action is stifled. By the way, our friends the army ants don't have that problem, since their "initiative" is probably more hard-wired by genetics than the result of any conscious thought.

All of which brings us back to the US Navy of the early 1800s. It did take the vision of one man to see how to build more powerful frigates than the British ones, yet under the monetary constraints then existing. But it then took a force (network?) of motivated, skilled, ownership-oriented sailors to make these weapons work. Did they have skilled commanders? For the most part yes, but it wasn't the iron discipline of the lash that created that fighting machine, rather that same set of skills, behaviors, and will.

The question is, at the national level, do we have the capacity to understand that our bureaucratic institutions must change if we are ever to "beat" a well-organized, smart, de-centralized enemy?

At the level of individual organizations, we must also develop a similar capacity, one that understands how increasing complexity and scale respond best to individual initiatives. Together, those individual initiatives typically demonstrate a combined wisdom far superior to that of any individual leader, as we have generally thought of that term.

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