

Strategies Gone Wild?

Implications for Resourcing the Force in the Midst of Complexity

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The sensemaking rubric suggests we should educate future defense professionals to work more collaboratively with their political clients.

The value of the first “P” in PPBE [*the planning, programming, budgeting, and execution process used as a strategic management tool in the Department of Defense*] is based in a strategic planning paradigm that has been under attack in both business and organizational literature for quite some time. There are obvious problems with trying to predict what kinds of forces and equipment systems will be needed for the uncertain future while trying to making sense of the ambiguous and complex contemporary operational environment. The fallacy of the logic of PPBE is that we can create long-term objectives (set seven to 15 years out) that will solve the complex problems we discover and re-discover today. There is little or no evidence that such long-range planning works and a growing body of evidence suggesting that it may be counterproductive to creating highly adaptive, self-organizing, and network-centric organizations. Yet the Department of Defense has been increasing the emphasis on planning, as evidenced by the plethora of written strategies (I count at least 15 in current publications available on the World Wide Web) and the growth of episodic planning events and processes, such as the Quadrennial Defense Review (QDR) and those contained in the Joint Strategic Planning System.

Given little or no evidence that strategic planning works, the emphasized use of the “P” in PPBE seems to reflect an organizational ideology—unquestioned belief that prob-

lems can be unilaterally defined scientifically, in relative independence from other conditions, through a process called *reductionism*. Indeed, the DoD force management practice is to reduce and categorize problems (treated as dependent variables) and associate them with potential funding of programmatic solutions in doctrine, organization, training, materiel, leadership, personnel, and facilities (the Department’s list of standing independent variables). Planning is believed to serve as an unemotional argument for justifying and objectively measuring the use of public resources. But I have yet to come across a study that examines how accurate our planning has been to produce the capabilities we need today. I performed an informal evaluation that reveals that we may be doing a rather poor job of prediction.

For example, the 1993 Report of the Bottom-Up Review (the precursor to the QDR process we have today) included only one counterterrorism task envisioned during “peace enforcement and intervention operations.” The task, “securing protected zones from internal threats, such as snipers, terrorist attacks, or sabotage,” was too vague to tie to any significant program or budget. A later example is the 1998 Clinton administration’s U.S. National Security Strategy for a New Century. This plan had a section on “transnational threats” that grouped terrorism along with drug trafficking and international crime. Counterterrorism goals were apparently addressed in the following sentence: “Our policy to counter international terrorists rests on the following principles: (1) make no concessions to terrorists; (2) bring all pressure to bear on all state sponsors of terrorism; (3) fully exploit all available legal mechanisms to punish international terrorists;

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and (4) help other governments improve their capabilities to combat terrorism.” This legalistic strategy did little to fuel defense programs that we need today. Joint Vision 2020, published in June 2000, focused on a force protection-oriented, antiterrorism goal, without mention of any major DoD comprehensive role in combating terrorism in an offensive or pre-emptive way.

Conspicuously absent in all of these strategy documents are predictions associated with prosecuting a global war on terror of the magnitude we are engaged in today. I conclude that these strategy documents hardly guided creation and acquisition of DoD capabilities to counter terrorism; and, with the advantage of hindsight, they were insufficiently visionary to mobilize the military toward a global war on terror that emerged within the future year’s defense planning window. It is also important to note that none of these documents gave any indication of foreseeable military operations that would include the multi-billion dollar need for military support for stability, security, transition, and reconstruction operations as we are witnessing today in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Applying the Concept of Sensemaking

Indeed, the environment we face—and perhaps have always faced as a nation—is best described as so complex as to defy the results of long-term, predictive-style planning. Instead of borrowing from the Cartesian scientific metaphor as the template for solving problems, perhaps the Department has to look for alternate paradigms for generating appropriate force capabilities. Studying a social-psychological concept called *sensemaking* has the potential to offer DoD new ways to contemplate multiple paradigms at the same time.

Sensemaking (to paraphrase the definition of the term from the works of University of Michigan professor Karl E. Weick) is being open to the process of using, modifying, rejecting, and creating shared mental models when dealing with situations of incoherency and disorderliness. There is a growing literature on sensemaking that suggests our view of reality is inherently unstable. That is, when we realize our current cultural preferences, frameworks, mental models, doctrines, decision processes, etc., do not seem to be working well for us to make sense of the world, we have to be of the reflexive mindset to explore alternative ways of sensemaking.

By adopting the premise of sensemaking—that humans can create and share a malleable sense of reality—defense acquisition and logistics professionals and their political elected or appointed clients (in both the Executive Branch and Congress) may also find new ways to think well beyond the false clarity associated with strategic planning. They may have to consider together the possibility that PPBE represents a cultural preference for a reality that serves more to lower anxiety and bring a comfort-

able sense of clarity to chaos. In that regard, PPBE may be a kind of psychic prison (what Weick calls a form of “pluralistic ignorance”) that precludes professionals and clients from considering alternate mental models that may facilitate more adaptive sensemaking. In his book *The Social Psychology of Organizing*, Weick explains how this phenomenon appears to work. My own remarks are bracketed:

This impression of knowing becomes strengthened because everyone seems to be seeing and avoiding the same things. And if everyone seems to agree on something, then it must exist and be true [*like the efficacy of PPBE, even in the face of contrary evidence*]. ... Having presumed that the environment is orderly and sensible [*or must be so*], managers make efforts to impose order [*as our military doctrine on “stability operations” demands*], thereby enacting the orderliness that is “discovered.” The presumption of nonequivocality provides the occasion for managers to see and do things that transform the environment into something that is unequivocal [*this explains the Department’s proliferation of strategy documents and processes*].

Weick goes on to say that this failure to realize the ritualistic nature of planning, results in self-fulfilling prophecies. For example, to consider changing the hierarchical nature of the PPBE process (a top-down decision-making paradigm) would involve challenging the traditional and elite power structure of the professional officer corps and defense civil service employees. These professionals typically view political appointees as temporary hires who lack the professional knowledge to see and interpret the world the way they do. The political appointees in turn see the professional employees as stuck in their ways and therefore not worth including in the decision-making process. The excluded body of professionals is insulted by this deliberate exclusion and, as Weick points out, will “cling even more tightly to the key element in their self-definition.” Political appointees are moved to make decisions documented in the planning phase of PPBE, giving them a sense of control; and the longer-term professionals, in the meantime, cling to the ideology of existing programs and budgets. Prophecies of the professional elites and their political clients are both confirmed by the never-ending cycle facilitated by the PPBE process. The spiraling effect of these confirmations makes a paradigm shift away from PPBE unlikely, unless defense professionals and their political clients revalue their assumptions about learning.

Learning to Value a Collaborative Approach

The sensemaking rubric suggests we should educate future defense professionals to work more collaboratively with their political clients. Sensemaking requires more emphasis on valuing collaborative inquiry with shared mindfulness of more effective metaphors (e.g., less to-

ward mechanical images of cause-and-effect relationships found in the PPBE planning doctrine, and more toward organic ones); a greater variety of mental models (e.g., those derived from systems thinking, complexity and chaos theories, and competing theories of politics); and multiple interpretive schemes (e.g., those stemming from various metaphysical perspectives that transcend the false science associated with PPBE and its related tightly engineered processes). In that regard, sensemaking requires de-emphasizing so-called lessons learned, written doctrine, established techniques, and other formal assertions that falsely convey a sense of unique professional knowledge and known cause-and-effect relationships. Sensemaking creates opportunities for inventive mindfulness within the wider variation of professional-client interpretations about environment. For example, the late Harvard professor, Donald Schön, describes in his book *The Reflective Practitioner*, the comparison of the philosophy of educating based in this sort of action-research and that of the traditional model of education as follows:

Complexity, instability and uncertainty are not removed or resolved by applying specialized knowledge to well-defined tasks. If anything, the effective use of specialized knowledge depends on a prior restructuring of situations that are complex and uncertain. An artful practice of the unique case appears anomalous when professional competence is modeled in terms of application of established techniques to recurrent events It is difficult for them to imagine how to describe and teach what might be meant by making sense of uncertainty, performing artistically, setting problems, and choosing among competing professional paradigms, when these processes seem mysterious in light of the prevailing model of professional knowledge.

In short, the defense education system needs to be versed in facilitating adaptive learning-while-acting (i.e., the new science of exploring complexity) rather than teaching forms of reductionism (i.e., the old science of linear cause-and-effect relationships) such as that inherent to strategic planning.

Because long-term predictions are implausible, a professional-client relationship should be oriented more on executing budgets while together exploring ill-defined, in-

tractable issues with an acknowledgement of the need to consider multiple interpretations of reality. With this acknowledgement of complexity, executing budgets must be viewed as a continuous and collaborative sensemaking process. The planning rubric for allocating resources should transform to a plan-to-learn model under normal conditions of surprise and uncertainty rather than a plan-to-know process based on the myth of the long-range strategic management paradigm. Defense Department professionals must serve as the antitheses of what Schön describes as the “self-serving elite who put science-based technique” as their “masquerade of extraordinary knowledge.” Defense professionals instead learn they must treat their political leaders as clients with whom they must have open and honest dialogue. Together, in the budget execution process, they build sensemaking bridges as they walk on them.

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Building elaborate communications networks and electronic collaboration capabilities can help enable more enlightened and improvisational forms of sensemaking by facilitating new sources of expertise, both inside and outside the cultural boundaries of the DoD. In a flexible

communications environment (like that exploited by Al Qaeda), it is fruitless to try and predict where leadership might emerge. The primary role of postmodern professional organizations can no longer be that of a producer of learnedness, stability, and certainty in managing financial resources. A transformed DoD would be constantly organizing in a never-ending condition of complexity—spawning a kind of spontaneous approach to unlearning the inculcated tools of PPB and focusing on shared sensemaking while executing the budget. A more holistic and collaborative intra-organizational and inter-organizational sensemaking approach signals a looped pattern of act—learn—act (mutual, real-time, interdependent responsiveness during budget execution) from the more familiar linear cause-effect paradigm associated with PPBE and its strategic planning-programming-budgeting sequence. Through revaluing learning as the principal strategy, encouraging client-centered sensemaking, and establishing flexible networks, the façade PPBE process can be removed and the culture truly transformed.

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