

An analysis of international security issues compiled by security professionals for business leaders and those who advise them

Taken together the 10 issues of Janusian Thinking have a common theme – whether examining political risk in individual countries, the nature of Islamist terrorism or how to detect terrorist planning and reconnaissance – we have been seeking to understand. In the security area we seek to understand to protect and then to prosper. In the week that the Iraq Survey Group presented its final report concluding that Saddam Hussein had no weapons of mass destruction we take a look at gullibility in strategic decision making – and how to avoid it.

We do not aim to provide definitive answers – just four short recommendations. We will not in general refer to the recent controversies and difficulties to do with the Iraq war which have been examined extensively in the media on both sides of the Atlantic. But where appropriate the sections are headed by short quotations from the sayings of US Defense Secretary, Donald Rumsfeld.

First – laugh how other people got it wrong.

And then imagine it was you. What was it like trying to audit Enron, designing the Ford Edsel or ignoring intelligence reports about the threat to Pearl Harbor? Try to imagine what it must have been like to make those decisions based on the information available at the time. Detailed material is available - most business schools provide good case studies on commercial disasters. There is an excellent and growing literature on military and government intelligence fiascos – indeed it is now possible to study the craft of intelligence analysis using the case study method at both London and Cambridge universities.

Espionage fiction particularly provides a mine of good examples. John Le Carre immediately springs to mind but we would recommend William Somerset Maugham. Better known for his steamy tales of colonial Malaya and the South Seas, Maugham also wrote seven short stories about a spy called John Ashenden based on his own intelligence experiences in the First World War. They portray vividly the uncertainty of war and how even minds and sensibilities trained and developed to sniff out deception can all too easily be gulled into a trap. Winston Churchill certainly found them rather too accurate for comfort and insisted that Maugham destroy a further fourteen stories on the grounds of national security.

Second - beware of groupthink.

*When people are working off the same set of facts
They tend to come to quite similar conclusions.....
Everyone is entitled to their own opinion,
But not their own facts.
And if you're all on the same sheet of music,
Why, you tend to sing the same song.*

Sept 24, 2002, news conference in Poland.

Again most good business schools teach the idea of groupthink and how it can ruin your business. Most good businessmen have an intuitive understanding of the phenomenon. It repays further research. Groupthink is a deliberately sub-Orwellian word coined by the late Yale psychologist Irving Janis to describe a particular process where otherwise perfectly sensible people seem able jointly to make the most silly and crass decisions. Janis originally coined the term to describe the collective failures which allowed the US Pacific fleet to be ambushed at Pearl Harbor.

Groupthink is a way of thinking which is brought about by certain organisational stresses, usually intense pressures to conform within decision-making groups, that seriously restrict the range of options considered, bias the analysis of existing information and promote simplistic answers and analytical stereotypes. Groupthink is what happens when decision makers start to think identically and refrain from challenging each other. It is widely accepted to be an "observable and repeated" behaviour. While its occurrence and the disasters which flow from it are frequent it is also widely acknowledged that both occurrence and effects can be mitigated by a few basic precautions.

Groupthink is discussed and recognised in one way or another in just about every report dealing with a political or commercial disaster from the inquiries into the sinking of the Titanic through the post mortem on the Arnhem landings to the inquiries and legal cases surrounding the collapse of Enron. Derek Higgs in his 2003 report on the role of non-executive directors examines the phenomenon in some detail and is especially interested in how independent and qualified non-executive directors can help boards avoid falling into the trap. The term has recently been re-introduced to the public consciousness by the 911 Inquiry in The United States.

Groups of decision makers whether commercial or political in thrall to groupthink tend to show the following characteristics inter alia:

- Having an illusion of invulnerability
- Rationalising poor decisions
- Believing in the group's morality
- Hiding true opinions out of loyalty or a desire for bonhomous unanimity

It is important to remember that the phenomenon is not forced but consensual. Generally the decision making group almost seduces itself into groupthink – there is rarely aggression and intimidation involved within the group. Although typically groups can be very aggressive externally to those who dissent from their view.

Third – copy decision making styles in other successful enterprises.

*My wife Joyce is here.
Every once in a while
In the morning
As I get up about five o'clock
And get ready to take a shower
And head for the office,
She says, "Don, where is he?"
I tell her that,
If I want to bring up Osama bin Laden,
I'll wake her up
And bring it up myself*

Feb 20, 2002, Nellis Air Force Base outside Las Vegas

We would suggest eschewing Mr Rumsfeld's approach to controversial or difficult subjects and emulating two organisations with a strong record in handling these things with open minded honesty - the Roman Catholic Church and the East German Secret Police – the Stasi.

To ensure that crazy decisions are not forced through or let slip through by sloppy thinking use a technique introduced by the Roman Catholic Church in 1587 – the Devil’s Advocate. More correctly known as Promotor Fidei – defender of the faith – this official is specifically charged with the duty to protest against the omission of any part of the detailed procedure laid down for the Canonisation of saints and to insist upon the consideration of any objection. His duties require him to prepare in writing all possible arguments, even at times seemingly slight, against the raising of anyone to the honours of the church. In other words the Church identified the need for a guardian both of the facts and the process of decision making. Wisely, the Roman Catholic Church on the issue of saints has always strongly believed that decisions will be less prone to error if the full procedures are gone through punctiliously.

One of the criticisms of the Devil’s Advocate system has traditionally been that no talented individual would wish to hold the post as he or she would be unlikely to prosper in the corporate world. Some analysts suggest that board members should take it in turns to play devil’s advocate. In reality most successful companies have people at a senior level who are known for taking and testing the contrarian view. Make sure they are allowed to thrive as did one of the Church’s longest serving (20 years) and most assiduous (he wrote the manual – still in use today) devil’s advocates who was elected Pope Benedict XIV in 1740.

Even the East German Secret Police, the infamous Stasi, began to weary of intelligence assessments always scrupulously in accordance with the opinions of the senior individual present or the party and offered professional dispensation from politically correct views in order to more soundly base their assessments. Agents were encouraged to tell the truth as they saw it (we are writing without irony). The scheme was especially successful in the Stasi’s overseas intelligence service headed by the famous/infamous master spy Markus Wolf. Surviving Stasi assessments on foreign affairs and international relations read remarkably well. In vigorous but elegant German many of them are models of clarity and rigorous disinterested analysis.

Fourth– use formal written analysis.

*You’re going to be told lots of things.
You get told things every day
That don’t happen.*

Feb. 28, 2003, Department of Defense briefing.

The Devil’s Advocate is duty bound to put everything in writing. Making saints is a serious business which the Church does not want to get wrong. The same applies to any security strategy. Unless you are absolutely sure that any project or business undertaking will be entirely unaffected by security issues it always pays in the long run to commission threat assessments or intelligence studies.

There is one technique that we have found useful in organising our own operations in Iraq and which a number of our clients use to great advantage in charting a business and security way forward in some of the more difficult and dangerous parts of the world - Scenario based forecasting. It is a difficult system for governments to use in policy formulation because it can imply too much uncertainty about the future. Many governments, in any case, affect a greater control over events than is in reality possible. But the system is popular in some areas of business management. It involves setting out a number of possible outcomes for a given strategy. The outcomes are usually graded as to probability with the most probable functioning in the same way as a more run of the mill predictive strategy paper.

Scenarios bring a number of advantages. Most fundamentally they free us from the dead hand of worst case forecasting and its equally dangerous counterpart - cherry-picking the most suitable facts to support an optimistic analysis and excluding the possibility of failure or less congenial outcomes.

Scenario forecasting is designed to be inclusive and to force decision making groups to look at the full spectrum of eventualities. Even if the range of scenarios are not exhaustive and the spectrum is restricted say by an outbreak of groupthink it is very hard to prepare a set of scenarios which are all rosy. It forces decision makers to think about failure and makes it much more difficult to propagandise rather than merely recommend a particular strategy.

Scenarios also give decisionmakers a head start in responding to changed circumstances. Usually, detailed responses are drafted to the individual scenarios. Less care and attention may be given to what seem less likely scenarios but the existence of the scenario at least forces some consideration. In essence the system institutionalises/formalises the Plan B approach.

Finally, in a fast moving crisis scenarios help with rapid orientation and allow a business or security event to be brought under control more readily. Even if events unfold in a manner markedly different from those originally considered in the scenarios there are usually sufficient points of similarity across the range to assist with rapid and coherent action.

Further information: Janusian Security Risk Management is the specialist political risk and security subsidiary of The Risk Advisory Group Ltd. For further information please visit www.janusian.com.