THE TRADECRAFT OF WARNING: WARNING INTELLIGENCE IN THE 21ST CENTURY

Date: November 23, 2021

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KEY EVENTS

On November 23, 2021, Mr. Randolph Pherson, Chief Executive Officer of Globalytica and President of Pherson Associates, presented on *The Tradecraft of Warning: Warning Intelligence in the 21st Century* at the 2021 CASIS West Coast Security Conference. The presentation was followed by a moderated question and answer period with questions from the audience and CASIS Vancouver executives. The key points discussed were who is responsible for the role of strategic warning, the causes of warning failures and how to mitigate them, as well as ways to deliver a warning message when dealing with senior policy makers.

NATURE OF DISCUSSION

Presentation

Mr. Pherson discussed the differences between line analysts and warning analysts in the intelligence field and the importance of having both working independently alongside each other. The speaker also examined common warning failures and how to mitigate them, some of the most effective structured analytical techniques, and the most effective way to warn policy makers.

Question Period

The question and answer period focused on how intelligence organizations can improve their diversity in the workforce and some of the most important skills required for intelligence analysts.

BACKGROUND

Presentation

To begin his presentation, Mr. Pherson reflected back on his first role as chief of political instability when he was a manger of analysts, which involved monitoring 26 countries with a goal of warning well in advance senior policy makers whether an unexpected problem was going to show up. During his time there, Mr. Pherson and his team were successful in providing effective warning to those involved and they never missed a call. Unfortunately, his department was eventually abolished because the stakeholders felt they didn't need a specific department for warning. Mr. Pherson strongly disagreed and stressed that providing warning intelligence is much different than basic analysis.

Mr. Pherson pointed out that line analysts build a conceptual model of how something operates. When new information is obtained, the model would be adjusted. If something comes in that does not fit with the model, individuals will often ignore it and end up missing something crucial. Warning analysts, on the other hand, are constantly looking for what does not fit. Their job is to challenge the framework and question assumptions. Mr. Pherson stressed the importance of having warning analysts working independently alongside line analysts as both processes are vital to intelligence operations.

At this point in his presentation, Mr. Pherson noted that the most common causes of warning failures consist largely of cognitive limitations. Most failures are caused by inadequate analysis where relevant information is discounted, misinterpreted, ignored, or rejected because it fails to fit a prevailing mental model. These types of cognitive biases are quick to form and resistant to change. Oftentimes, an initial incorrect perception will persist even after better information becomes available, as any new information is generally made to fit into an existing conceptual framework.

It is possible for analysts to overcome these mindsets and better anticipate events by integrating specific tools and techniques into the analytic process. The primary goal of these techniques is to:

- Identify and challenge key assumptions;
- Inject creativity and leverage your imagination to discover unknown 'unknowns';
- Explore alternatives and competing hypotheses; and
- Question your line of reasoning and your interpretation of data.

As an example, Mr. Pherson reflected on a recent experience where he was hospitalized in Iceland. The hospital had a team of about five doctors—from the most junior medical professional to the most senior—coming in and out of the room to get their opinions. This was an effective way to challenge assumptions and obtain differing perspectives on how to assess and treat him. Mr. Pherson highlighted how having that level of diversity and openness in the workforce is essential for this type of analysis to happen.

Mr. Pherson provided a quick overview of what he considers the most effective structured analytical techniques and divided them into the analytic process they require:

- Challenging your assumptions
  - Key Assumptions Check—checking assumptions in the beginning and in the end of the analytical process to see if anything has changed during research when coming up with the analysis.
  - Classic Quadrant Crunching—breaking down assumptions into subsets and doing some morphological analysis to generate different variations of what could happen.
- Tracking alternative trajectories
  - Indicators Generation and Validation—validating the indicators one has and asking, 'what will happen and how do we know if we should pay attention to it?'
- Anticipating the unanticipated
  - High Impact/Low Probability Analysis—coming up with two to three scenarios, using indicators to track them, giving oneself advance warning, and having two to three alternatives.
  - Pre-mortem Analysis and Structured Self-Critique—making a list of things to see if one has made a mistake before providing an analysis.

Mr. Pherson also placed an emphasis on foresight techniques, which are particularly helpful to analyze very complex situations. Multiple Scenario Generation, for example, involves gathering a large group of diverse individuals together and having them take part in workshops on complex topics like climate change.

To wrap up his presentation, Mr. Pherson highlighted that understanding who is requesting the warning intelligence and determining their level in the policy chain of command is essential to successfully communicating warning

intelligence to the stakeholder. In his experience, Mr. Pherson found that there are at least three types of policy makers and each of them must be approached differently.

The 'traditional policy makers' expect the analyst to deliver information and provide insight into how to think about the problem. In this type of interaction, the problem needs to be framed in a way that the stakeholder can engage effectively and find a solution.

The 'novice decision maker' can be problematic because they do not fully understand the intelligence analysis process nor the role of the analyst, and they often assume there is a hidden agenda. When dealing with these decision makers, analysts must be much more careful and give them only what they need to know, and no additional information. Revealing sources and methods when it is not critical could put the entire intelligence community at risk.

Finally, when dealing with senior policy makers, Mr. Pherson has found that it is most effective to use a two-stage approach. First, the analyst must identify the policy maker's second in command and enlist their help to determine whether the problem at hand is on their boss' radar, and whether they can assist in identifying policy solutions to address the problem. In the second stage, a meeting is scheduled with the senior policy maker, the warning message is delivered, and the counterpart provides policy options. This allows for a plan to be developed ahead of time and packaged in a way that it optimizes its receptivity by the client.

Question Period

During the question and answer period, Mr. Pherson reflected on his experience in past organizations and noted that superiors often request to build a diverse team to work on an intelligence task in order to gain a variety of perspectives; however, this rarely happens in his experience. Mr. Pherson opined that building a diverse team needs to occur from the ground up, meaning it needs to start with the hiring practices of human resources. The level of diversity needs to be built into the very fabric of the organization. Otherwise, assumptions will not be challenged appropriately and analysis will be low quality.

Regarding the skills required for intelligence analysis, Mr. Pherson stressed that the reading and writing aspect of the job is critical. In order to be successful in the intelligence field, practitioners must actually enjoy reading and be skilled at writing comprehensively and concisely. If these skills are not at the forefront, Mr. Pherson suggested pursuing alternative analyst positions in different fields.

KEY POINTS OF DISCUSSION

Presentation

- There are two types of analysts in the intelligence field: line analysts build a conceptual model of how something operates and adjusts the model as new information comes in, and warning analysts are responsible for challenging the framework and questioning assumptions, specifically looking for what does not fit.
- Common causes of warning failures are the result of cognitive limitations such as discounting, misinterpreting, ignoring, or rejecting new information because it fails to fit a prevailing mental model.
- The most effective way to overcome these mental mindsets is to implement specific tools and techniques into the analytic process to identify and challenge key assumptions, explore alternatives and competing hypotheses, and question your line of reasoning and your interpretation of data.
- When dealing with policy makers, it is important to know where they fit in the chain of command so the analyst can engage with them appropriately and effectively deliver warning messages.
- There are different approaches to dealing with decision makers, depending on whether they are traditional policy makers, 'novice' policy makers or senior policy makers.

Question Period

- Hiring a diverse workforce is imperative to building a proper team, otherwise, assumptions will not be challenged appropriately, and analysis will be low quality.
- Building a diverse team needs to occur from the ground up, meaning it needs to start with the hiring practices of human resources.
- It is critical for intelligence analysts to possess exceptional reading and writing skills in order to be successful in the intelligence field.

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