

**ASYMMETRIC THINKING IN THE MILITARY**

*"Ex Impossible Quodlibet"*

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"From Impossibility, Anything Follows"

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The world of new possibilities is asymmetric. It does not follow the logic of usual patterns. Thinking for new possibility is also asymmetric. Like oblique shafts of illumination, new possibility comes out of nowhere, and all of a sudden, creative action can be taken. Creativity itself is an activity to create something, but Asymmetric Thinking is not creativity. Instead, its purpose is to introduce the *possibility* of new action. Getting "outside the box" is often an obviously good idea. Why then, doesn't it happen very often, even with those who advocate it? The reason is that the possibility for getting outside of historical patterns isn't there in the first place.

Asymmetric thinking has more to do with attitude, frame of mind and ways of "being" than with action. It goes beyond conventional approaches to creativity in that it reaches into the heart of what's blocking creativity in the first place. This notion is often hard to sell to men and women whose lives are dedicated to taking action. The problem is that they are stuck with their traditional possibilities. And stuck is stuck.

Asymmetric Thinking is an educational process for teaching people to create new possibilities for others and themselves in everyday situations and in special projects. This happens through assessment, education and training. At best, it is simultaneously associated with strategic initiatives or other mission related activities. It has impact on values, attitudes, commitment, skills and uncharacteristic action.

Great leaders employ Asymmetric Thinking. But in these perilous times, there is a need for Asymmetric Thinking at every level of our military. Demands for increased mobility and flexibility require continuous innovation in the face of enemies who think in ways that don't occur to us naturally. The right thing to do is often hidden because we don't examine critical assumptions that exist outside of our usual ways of thinking.

Our military's already-high state of readiness and execution will respond dramatically to the opportunity of Asymmetric Thinking. Implementing Asymmetric Thinking through an organization will require essential skill development, new language and different models analysis. The value of this investment will be to prepare for achieving goals when past practices no longer suffice, or there is no common basis for comparing our own method.

Asymmetric Thinking is a hallmark of American military success. Jimmy Doolittle's carrier-based bomber raid on Tokyo in WWII, Douglas MacArthur's amphibious landing at Inchon in the Korean War in the face of 30 foot tides, the act of scuttling ships as a platform for supply piers in the Normandy Invasion, and the wide end sweep made by the XVIII Airborne Corps in Desert Storm are each prime examples of Asymmetric Thinking. Each made something possible that was not possible before.

Such people see themselves naturally as creators of new possibilities while others seem content to operate in an already existing framework. In this sense, being a creator of new possibilities is an act of self declaration -- the self declared ability to create the possibility of possibility itself, where it doesn't already exist. For Asymmetric Thinking to be successful, people must be able to develop ideas within a culture that promotes the use of new possibilities. In that culture, a mistake is a demonstration of one possibility that requires no further consideration

Einstein said that problems could not be solved at the same level of thinking from which they were created. He could have been referring to the fast-changing terrorist threat or nuclear tensions on the Korean peninsula.

Asymmetric Thinking is a valuable approach as we reassess our methods of planning, training,

and preparation. It will enable us to go beyond the traditional ways we have been taught to think in schools and in much of our historic military training. It will train us to be dissatisfied with following habitual patterns of thinking and reiterating previously-proven solutions to the problems that arise. It will teach us to examine all the possibilities, and become willing to generate never-before tested scenarios in order to see all that's available in our decision-making process.

### **A New Thinking Process**

We must begin with the question: "Where does new possibility come from?" It clearly doesn't come from brainstorming alone, nor even from thinking "outside the box." Unless there is a palpable sense of new possibility, and a small or large rush of inspiration, one is left only with a list, and not much new will happen.

There are three areas of knowledge in any operation. There's everything you know. There is information you know you don't have (the things you *know* you don't know). And finally there is the unknown (things you *don't know* you don't know). This last area is the blind spot. This is also where truly new possibilities reside.

Martin Heidegger, the German philosopher, said that "real" thinking only happens when a subject is worthy of thought. He argued that most of what passes for thinking is not actually thinking, but merely the repetition of what is already known and remembered. The challenge in teaching Asymmetric Thinking is to reliably access this area of the unknown -- what you don't know you don't know. This is the area of true discovery, invention, and asymmetric thought. Creating new possibility has more to do with attitude, commitments, values and ways of being than with concrete reality and logistics -- the stuff of which most people's lives are made.

Before examining approaches to teaching Asymmetric Thinking it's important to focus on the attitudes and ways of being that allow it. Without these attitudes in place Asymmetric Thinking can not happen. When successful, the ideas generated will actually 'feel' possible, in contrast to brainstormed lists of options that carry no palpable sense of asymmetric or excitement.

### **Asymmetric Thinking in the Military**

During Desert Storm, LTG Pagonis was faced with the almost insurmountable task of positioning the combat force's equipment and keeping those forces well-supplied in all classes of supply. He knew the doctrine well, but this situation demanded solutions that were quite different from the normal doctrinal process of "onward movement and re-supply." The mission called for the complete integration of combat support and combat service support capabilities. In order to be successful, this support had to be capable of operating 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, for months on end.

The capability was generated by the integration of units into convoy support sites, where soldiers could be fed and bathed while their equipment was being serviced, repaired and refueled. Petroleum units were sited along the roads to refuel equipment as needed. Military police were integrated into the sites and along highways to provide both force protection and security. The unit LTG Pagonis formed was the 22<sup>nd</sup> to Support Command. That command became the model for the Theater Support Command concept. Today the 377<sup>th</sup> Theater Support Command, modeled after the 22<sup>nd</sup> SUPCOM, serves as the senior logistical headquarters in Iraq and Kuwait in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom.

This type of innovative thinking opened a whole new set of possibilities for the logistics forces. Innovation ("the introduction of new ideas," according to Webster's Dictionary), was paramount to the coalition successes in both Desert Storm and Iraqi Freedom.

Several other fine examples of Asymmetric Thinking resulted from the challenge issued to the Army by General Reimer, then FORSCOM Commander, to better utilize the capabilities of Army Reserve units in day-to-day operations.

An example: The 143<sup>rd</sup> Transportation Command, an Army Reserve unit located in Orlando, Florida, was tasked to help relocate the 3<sup>rd</sup> Armored Cavalry Regiment from Ft. Bliss, Texas to Fort Carson, Colorado. Many thought this to be a task far beyond what Reserves were capable of performing. Yet while most had had envisioned one mass move, LTC. Gary Engel, the

Transportation Movements Officer of the 143rd, envisioned something quite different -- the move would take place in increments, closely coordinated with the 3rd Armored Cavalry Regiment's relocation of families to Fort Carson. This operation was highly successful and, met the requirements of the 3rd Armored Cavalry Commander. The exercise included both Army Reserve and Army National Guard soldiers, and eventually Active Components soldiers.

The 49th Area Support Group, located at Fort Carson, Colorado, and commanded by Col. Eddie Sasser, became involved in the operation because Col. Sasser also employed Asymmetric Thinking and it was a wonderful, worthwhile training opportunities for his soldiers. It is estimated that this exercise, called "Rifles Move" saved many thousands of dollars in training money and provided invaluable training opportunities for soldiers of all components..., an excellent reward for Asymmetric Thinking.

### **Building on Excellence**

As a result of its success, and because many others had started to see the possibilities involved in such an exercise, the 143rd was next tasked to move the 35th Air Defense Artillery Brigade from Ft. Lewis, Washington to Ft. Bliss, Texas. The exercise was called "Patriots Move." This move could have been accomplished by using standard rail or highways methods, but once again LTC. Engel saw the possibilities of other training opportunities.

His knowledge of war plans in some Pacific scenarios generated the concept of using army watercraft to move the Brigade's equipment from Ft. Lewis, Washington through a port in California, and from there to further move by military vehicles through Phoenix, Arizona and on to Ft. Bliss. War plans clearly called for the use of army watercraft to perform such a mission, and here was the opportunity to practice this task.

The result was a close coordination of activities between 143rd TRANSCOM and the 35th Air Defense Artillery Brigade, which orchestrated the single largest use of army watercraft since Vietnam. The mission was a total success, despite bad weather. It was also a precursor of things to come. The use of Army watercraft to support operations is now an accepted operational capability and is fully engaged in many facets of operations. Today Army watercraft are

providing invaluable support in of Iraqi Freedom.

These two exercises and many others like them served as valuable training experiences and examples for leaders such as Major General David Kratzer and Brigadier General Jack Stultz, who today are leading the logistics efforts in Kuwait and Iraq. These officers learned well, have trained their staffs to look for all the possibilities, and allow them the flexibility to do so.

## **Components of Asymmetric Thinking**

The first step in becoming a Asymmetric Thinker is to recognize that you, personally, are 100 percent responsible for generating new possibilities for yourself and for others. Additionally, in our review of successful Asymmetric Thinkers in military, business and political situations, certain attitudes, frames of reference and ways of being are necessary. Among these are:

### *1 Trust In The Collective Intelligence Of Others*

To create new possibilities you have to be willing to encourage it at all levels. For instance, it's possible that you can change the way soldiers are fed, do guard duty, or perform maintenance. But, if you get the new idea from them, they feel part of the organization because they've had a voice; they have been recognized. Too often, leaders make the mistake of categorizing people based on their level. Too many people think that junior officers can't make a meaningful contribution because of their lesser experience. Yet everyone has experience in thinking, looking at problems in different ways, and can use their imagination.

Even if a suggestion is unusable, it often leads to something new and worthwhile. Trusting in the collective intelligence of others opens the way to Asymmetric Thinking.

### *2 Personal Presence*

You cannot underestimate the value of personal presence. Asymmetric Thinking without personal presence is rare. When a commander visits troops in the field, whether they're training or actually in combat, they know that the commander doesn't have to be there. They know that if you are there, you must care about what's going on, and probably care about them as individuals.

Leaders in Asymmetric Thinking talk to soldiers that they meet. It is often a soldier's perspective that opens up possibilities, at their level and yours. A good example of this was displayed in a conversation with a sergeant during the exercise of moving the Third Cavalry from Seattle to Ft. Bliss. In response to the question: "Well, how's it going?" the sergeant said, "Well sir, it's not going real well -- that soldier over there has only has one uniform, and she's got to wash it every single night." It didn't take long to light a fire under Supply, who took initiative, went back to the same Sergeant, and determined that six more people didn't have their full issue.

Within two days, the soldiers without uniforms had been re-supplied. Just as importantly, attitudes throughout the unit improved when other soldiers saw what happened. Some soldiers consider new possibilities, such as re-enlisting, and showed other expressions of unit cohesion.

### 3 *Connection*

The closer the connection between the leader and the group, as well as among the members of the group, the more Asymmetric Thinking becomes a reality. The best leaders know instinctively that there is untapped potential in any group and work to set an environment that brings out the best of people. The best leaders are always hunting for connection with the group. Connection, or the chemistry of relationship, evokes new possibilities. General Tommy Franks has always had the ability to connect with soldiers and his staff. He asks questions that provoke thought and keeps asking deeper questions until people begin to reveal what they don't know and don't know they don't know. This penetrating inquiry combined with genuine caring has people think in new ways. The ensuing action is direct and imaginative.

### **Can Leadership For Asymmetric Thinking Be Taught?**

Asymmetric Thinking is teachable but, as with any discipline, the effects of such training will vary.

Some people employ Asymmetric Thinking, but haven't been able to lead others to do so. Some don't use Asymmetric Thinking but will adopt it easily. Others will participate fully in training and benefit from the effects of it, but will never generate Asymmetric Thinking on their own. And some people are so hindered by other concerns that they have great difficulty in thinking asymmetrically for themselves, let alone creating it for others.

In an unpublished letter, Einstein wrote that the code breaker regarding invention in any human endeavor is that, "there is no necessary relationship between sense experience and thinking." Einstein said that, "..., while we experience life through our senses and what we think in response to those senses makes perfect sense to us, this thinking is purely arbitrary". In other words, we have the ability to think anything we want. When a person is able to appreciate this, it allows for the free play of imagination. Asymmetric Thinking enables such free play of imagination.

As an example, the Sylvan Learning Center's educational process produces breakthroughs in reading, even with the most unlikely students. By reducing reading to its smallest elements, and with a process of continuous assessment and inventive teaching, they succeed where conventional education often fails.

A similar educational process is possible for teaching both senior and junior officers to think independently, respond to asymmetry (the absence of a common basis of comparison in response to a quality, or in operational terms, a capability), and to create new possibilities in planning and on the ground responsiveness.

In learning Asymmetric Thinking, practices include:

*Practice in identifying and promising unpredictable outcomes.* e.g. uncharacteristic commitment evokes uncharacteristic thinking. For example, John Kennedy promising to land a man on the moon within ten years.

*Practice in stalking possibility.* e.g. noticing adjacent possibilities, conversations for

possibility and sustaining a personal attitude of openness.

*Practice in suspension.* e.g. suspending the need to act and implement for the sake of Asymmetric Thinking; suspending the need to “look conventional” in conversation.

*Practice in shifting the normal reaction to stress from reactive thinking and emotion to Asymmetric Thinking.*

*Practice in seeing what is missing as well as what is there.* e.g. recognizing that something needs to be seen as missing before it can become a part of the solution.

*Practice in provoking thought.* e.g. deep questioning, “pulling the rug” on existing ideas, giving people real problems they don’t already know how to solve.

*Practice in integrating opposites.* e.g. the creative power that comes from holding opposites in one’s mind; not stuck in either/or thinking.

*Practice in maintaining an open mind, a “beginner’s mind.” practice in hovering.* e.g. rising above the field mentally, and then observing.

*Practice in creating context.* e.g. identifying what’s common to all past attempts at solution and acting against such commonalities.

*Practice in identifying and going beyond self limiting beliefs and assumptions.*

*Practice in listening generously.* e.g. with deep appreciation for the feelings and experience of others -- colleagues, superiors, subordinates, civilians, and even enemies.

*Practice in moving from Asymmetric Thinking to decisive action and back again.* e.g. remembering that mission is context.

There are multitudes of subsets within each of these practice sets. It's not enough to recognize or even appreciate the virtue of these practices. Mastery, and being able to apply them in stressful and unpredictable circumstances requires training and on-the-job application. Developing such skills at a high level is not a quick fix. It comes from counter-intuitive and non-traditional education, and direct experience that changes not simply what a person understands, but how they view things. This, in turn, comes from a combination of new ideas and vocabulary, and on the job application over time.

### **Trainer Qualities**

Teaching a significant number of people to become masters of Asymmetric Thinking in planning and stressful operational situations depends significantly on trainer commitment and ability to “walk the talk.” These trainer qualities include:

*Absolute commitment to the individual student's success:* In every field in which there is mastery (art, music, sports), achievement and sustaining that achievement is always a result of a personal bond between mentor and student. This can't be an exercise conducted “in principle.”

*Commitment to presenting repetitive, paradoxical challenges:* Students need to grapple with impossible situations in which any choice is both right and wrong. For example, in the sentence, “This sentence is false,” is the sentence true or false? If it is true it is false and if it is false it is true. Becoming comfortable with questions and situations that have no “right” answer enables Asymmetric Thinking and uncharacteristic action in the face of asymmetric threat.

*Commitment to honoring the individual's style and natural interests:* New possibilities are not a function of appearance. If it has to look a certain way, the purpose is defeated.

*Commitment to surfacing and resolving unspoken disputes with students as individuals and in groups:* Often, the important conversation for new possibility is public, not private. If anything important is unsaid, the process is easily undermined.

*Commitment to persistence, always identifying the next practical piece of work in which Asymmetric Thinking applies:* This includes management of mastery as to when they are ready to go to the next level.

### **A Culture of Asymmetric Thinking**

Asymmetric thinking will expand if leaders use and encourage it in contexts they see it as important. Without such encouragement, it can be seen as “rocking the boat” and being “out of line.”

In this regard, Asymmetric Thinking is more a matter of being part of a culture than an individual attitude and skill. For example, the general officers who led the logistics operation in Iraqi Freedom developed in an environment in which they were encouraged to take a mission or training requirement, consider new possibilities, and open a full range of options. Instead of having one answer available to them, they'd have two or three.

There is immense value in an organization that is allowed and enabled to think in a way that look at possibilities and how things might be done differently to accomplish a mission.

A critical value in a military organization is trust. By encouraging people to think for possibilities, trust improves. When people have an opportunity to talk back and forth openly, they see that the men and women around them are not exactly what they imagined.., and that many have good ideas, and values similar to their own. Consequently, one powerful effect of such Asymmetric Thinking is increased unit cohesion.

### **Taking the Next Steps**

Courses of action that offer "possibilities" for increasing the military's ability to deal with asymmetric threat include:

*Demonstrating personal benefit of an education in Asymmetric Thinking to military policy makers themselves.*

*Applying Asymmetric Thinking in mission planning and analysis to develop asymmetric courses of action.*

*Using Asymmetric Thinking as a calming effect in stressful situations. i.e., rapid and unexpected reactions by soldiers to immediate threats.*

*Assessing officers and providing special education to those already having aptitude for Asymmetric Thinking.*

*Training a cadre of Asymmetric Thinking "coaches" who could be assigned to units in the field as needed.*

*Designing special programs for use in War Colleges and other training Centers.*

*Training Military Trainers in the skills necessary for Asymmetric Thinking.*

*Training leaders to find their way through the "blind spot."*

## **The Cost of Inaction**

But what if we don't incorporate Asymmetric Training into our military? What are the costs?

They are many, including:

Emotional cost in low morale of soldiers having to stay in Iraq.

Political cost at home of having troops picked off one by one in a Guerilla war.

Financial costs way beyond what was predicted (at least in public).

Military cost in getting 'stuck in Vietnam' (vs. the Revolutionary War, in which we seem to have had the edge over the British in Asymmetric Thinking and presenting asymmetric threat)

These costs of getting stuck in a reactive mode are often unnecessary. Asymmetric Thinking can

be taught. By doing so we strengthen our already-excellent military, making it more agile and effective in dealing with asymmetric threat. To ignore improvements in Asymmetric **Thinking when the technology is available and trainable, is dangerous.**

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### **Postscript**

The other day, we heard a friend tell of going to his fiftieth high school reunion. In the final game of his 1952 football season, in view of 30,000 spectators in Harvard Stadium and millions on local television, he dropped a short pass in the end zone. At the time, the game outcome was uncertain, and it seemed an incredible error. No one talked to him. His parents had no comment. He was embarrassed and ashamed. In the years afterward, he was, for himself, the guy who dropped the ball and there was no way he would become that public again.

On the first evening of the reunion, he met Chris, the quarterback who threw the ill-fated pass. They were both visibly happy to see one another. There was immediate trust, personal presence, and connection between them. Suddenly, out of the blue, Chris said, "I've wanted to apologize to you for fifty years. It was a lousy pass. It was behind you and there is no way you could have caught it. Sometime, I'll show you the game films and you'll see. I know you must have suffered with this over the years, and so have I. Even though we won the game, this has stayed with me."

Fifty years of history, limitation, and non asymmetric thinking, dissolved in a rush of new possibilities for each of them. Our friend's wife said later that, in that moment, Chris completed the pass, for both of them.