



HUMAN CAPITAL



Is NATO an Insight Making Machine?

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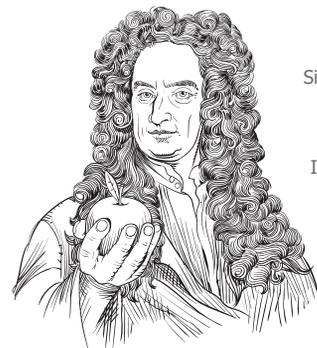
INSIGHT

The ability to have a deep, clear and, sometimes, sudden understanding of a complicated problem or situation. This deeper understanding often comes from re-thinking the topic, that is, thinking about an existing topic from a new and fresh perspective.

However, insight is often shrouded in myth and seen as a gift from the gods, so it is no surprise history provides us with an established narrative, such as Newton's insight into gravity with the fall of an apple, Einstein riding a light beam, and Archimedes' eureka moment in the bath. If we believe these recurring stories, then insights are purely chance events — they just *happen to us*. This is not particularly useful if we have to wait around for inspiration to strike. The reality though is that insight arises *because of us*. This is explored below.

*"We cannot solve our problems with the same level of thinking we used when we created them."
Albert Einstein*

Consider leadership. When was the last time you had a new insight about your own personal leadership style? Was it within the last month or year, or are you still relying on the ideas you had earlier in your career when you were, arguably, less experienced? If we are honest, rarely do we take the opportunity to update our thoughts about these key themes that are important in our modern organizations like leadership, problem solving and decision making. Even though the world around us is constantly changing.



Sir Isaac Newton
"The Universal Law of Gravitation".
Insight happens because of us.

OUR COLLECTIVE success depends on working together despite our differences and diverse backgrounds. For this reason, the recent efforts in Human Capital initiated by Headquarters Supreme Allied Commander Transformation (HQ SACT) have been an exciting move in the right direction. The first major milestone event took place in March 2019 at the Joint Warfare Centre (JWC). Hosted by HQ SACT, the Human Capital Workshop brought together exponents of this emerging field from across NATO to focus on five key areas, including leader development and organizational effectiveness. Momentum continues to grow, pulling in experience from across NATO. In addition to these developments, there is one fundamental enabler which will help accelerate their progress: *insight*. For NATO to advance and adapt, there must be a steady flow of new thought and insight from all corners of the Alliance. But how do we foster insight in our human capital? Is NATO an insight making machine?

The Value of Insights

Insight is widely sought after in any discipline and those possessing it are often in high demand. The ability to see a situation clearly allows us to respond accordingly when there is chaos all around. We often look to leaders who can "remain calm during the storm" regardless of what is going on around them. When their minds are calm and in control it allows them to make the best decisions in the moment.

“For NATO to advance and adapt, there must be a steady flow of **new thought** and **insight** from all corners of the Alliance.”



Photo courtesy of European Air Transport Command Public Affairs Office

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Having a clear mind is much simpler than we are made to believe.

When Do You Typically Have New Ideas?

If you ask a hundred people the same question, then common themes arise, some of which you may have experienced yourself:

- in the shower
- going for a run
- relaxing on holiday
- being in nature
- driving to work

In NATO, and particularly in ACT, the ability to have new insights is vital. But why can't they be everyday occurrences? We can hardly resort to installing showers in meeting rooms or taking our team for long drives along the coast. So, what are we to do? Paradoxically, we tend to have fresh new insights when we are not trying to have them! In fact, trying to force ourselves to have an insight often makes it harder. Consider the "tip of the tongue" phenomenon when the answer you need does not come to mind until you have let it go and moved on to something else. The truth is that insights can actually be a more common experience when we update our understanding of how the mind works. With this understanding we improve the likelihood that insights and clear thought can naturally arise. So much so that they can actually become a normal, regular part of our lives and can have a powerful impact in our organizations.

"When you have exhausted all possibilities, remember this: you haven't."
Thomas Edison

When a team has this common understanding, together they can experience new solutions and fresh thought on issues they may have struggled with in the past; old conflicts can also evaporate when new perspectives arise from within the team. With the right state of mind, a problem that previously felt impossible to solve can be unlocked with a new perspective. So, what is the key? Simply put, insights grow best with a clear mind.

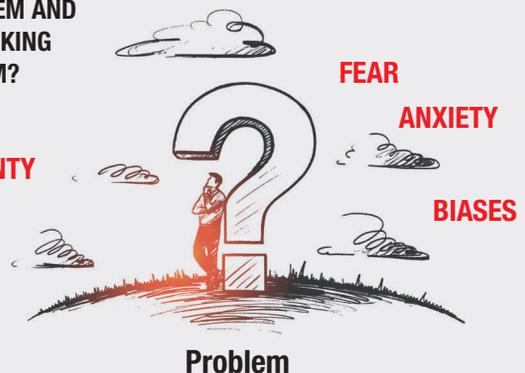
Mental Clarity

Consider the peak athlete who is able to get "in the zone" to perform at their best. It is the same for the surgeon, the pilot, or any other professional where they find a sense of clarity, giving them full access to their talents. This is not to say that a clear mind will make you a professional golfer overnight. However, when you are able to enter a situation with a calm and still mind, then you readily have more access to your skills and abilities.

This is true in every domain of our lives. When our minds are clear we are more reflective, innovative and compassionate. We also become better problem solvers and decision makers, as we make new connections and associations, revealing ideas never considered before. With this clarity, you are more able

HOW MUCH IS THE PROBLEM AND HOW MUCH IS OUR THINKING ABOUT THE PROBLEM?

UNCERTAINTY
DOUBT
HABITS
MEMORIES



“Thought is what connects or disconnects us from that **natural sense of clarity.**”

to *respond* rather than blindly *reacting* to the situation. This clear mind gives you a “psychological freedom” allowing you to act in a more responsive and adaptable way.

Gaining Mental Clarity

So, how do we achieve this state of mind? Another prevailing myth we have accepted is that we must live a disciplined life to attain any decent level of mental clarity. This often conjures up images of meditating before dawn, reading the Stoics and living the ascetic life. While there is no harm in any of these pursuits, having a clear mind is actually much simpler than we are made to believe. In fact, there is nothing we have to attain or strive for this clarity. Rather, it is simply something we need to reconnect with. As outlandish as it sounds, this sense of clarity is always present in us — much like the sun is always there in the sky but sometimes blocked by the clouds. There is no hard work required — in fact, the reason why we don't have this sense of clarity more often is because we are trying too hard to attain it.

The simple key reconnecting us with a calm, clear mind is *thought*. Thought is what connects or disconnects us from that natural sense of clarity. Consider for a moment when you feel overwhelmed. Typically, we are “busy-headed”, flushed with negative emotions and moods. There is no surprise then when we are in these states that we are closed off to fresh ideas and solutions because there's no room for them in our heads at that moment. Our internal mental storms obscure our ability to think clearly and be open to insight.

In these situations, we typically look outside of ourselves to place the blame for this degraded mental state. It's because someone cut us off in traffic, or because a colleague came



ABOVE: JWC's 2019 newcomers' One Team Programme. Now in its sixth year, this programme is aimed at exposing the new staff to the concepts and mind-sets, which build strong, resilient teams. Photo by JWC PAO

to work in a bad mood, or because it's raining again! The solution however is not to try to change the world around us, but instead realise that the actual obstacles blocking this sense of clarity are our own thoughts. Nothing more. So, we are never reacting directly in a situation, but rather *our thoughts* about the situation. Plus, these thoughts are often incorrect, biased and filtered — so we should always be aware that our thoughts are constantly distorting our perception of the situation — thus reducing how we act. In a course conducted many years ago in HQ SACT, the audience were asked to list the things that typically annoyed them, and traffic featured high on the list. Incredibly, a Turkish

participant mentioned that he loved the traffic in the US. He loved it because he used that so-called “wasted time” to learn another language on tape while he sat in traffic. Although most of us would see traffic as negatively affecting our mood, there is nothing inherently positive or negative about it, once again it's our thoughts which make it so. The bottom line in this and every other experience of our lives is that the quality of our thoughts about the experience will determine how we respond to it.

Take a moment to consider a situation you struggle with either at work or personally. Ask yourself, is it the actual situation you are reacting to, or your thoughts about the situation (which are often incorrect)? In most cases, particularly with situations where we feel overwhelmed, it is because we have not given our thinking a chance to settle down (as it inevitably always does) for this natural clarity to arise.

Dealing with Our Thoughts

If our thoughts are the key, how do we deal with these negative thoughts that clutter our minds? We all know the typical strategies: re-frame them, control them, rationalise them and even suppress them. There is no shortage of different treatments and approaches to forc-

“If I was to sum up the single biggest problem of senior leadership in the Information Age, it's a lack of reflection. Solitude allows you to reflect while others are reacting. We need solitude to refocus on prospective decision-making, rather than just reacting to problems as they arise.”
James Mattis



ing a clearer mind. Ultimately though, these approaches soon reach their limits of effectiveness — because trying to "fix" your thoughts often only gives them more attention, which makes them stronger (for example, try to not think of a purple elephant).

The reality is that we have thousands of thoughts every day, many of which have no effect on us at all as they simply pass by without us noticing. The thoughts that constantly plague us and take up headspace only do so because we continue to focus on them. Despite what popular psychology may describe, every thought is neutral and temporary. They only become problematic and stick around because we choose to give them our attention, otherwise, they would just float by like every other thought. This is not to say that we should ignore important issues in our lives but trying to solve them while we're in a tense, frustrated and low states of mind severely limits your ability to come up with insightful fresh ideas. You may recognise this in yourself how you respond to situations when you're angry compared to when you're calm.

Ideally, you want to be in the best frame of mind to deal with your issues regardless of what is thrown at you in life. The solution often is to simply wait. Those thoughts will soon pass, and the mood will naturally lift. These are the ideal conditions for mental clarity, which increases our potential for new thought and insight regardless of the topic. This is why some of our most respected leaders took solace in long



ABOVE: The author, Paul Sewell.
Photo by JWC PAO

"You do not need to leave your room. Remain sitting at your table and listen. Do not even listen, simply wait, be quiet still and solitary. The world will freely offer itself to you to be unmasked, it has no choice, it will roll in ecstasy at your feet."

Franz Kafka



Illustration by Natata, Shutterstock

walks, time alone to think and keeping a journal. It allowed their minds to raise above the normal and well-worn boundaries of daily life into fresh fields of new thought.

How to Have More Insights

To conclude, there are a number of principles worth considering for a clearer state of mind:

- Insights can't be forced but they become more of a daily occurrence when we have a clear mind,
- A calm resting mind is the ideal mental state for new thought and insight as it allows us to think more broadly allowing us to respond rather than react,
- This natural state of mind is always present, but it is often obscured by our thoughts,
- The quality of those thoughts determines how well connected we are to this state of mind in the moment,
- All thoughts (even the negative and limiting ones) are temporary and not real and will naturally come and go if we leave them alone, allowing this clear state of mind to naturally rise.

Recommendations

1 Generating new ideas

How can you introduce more reflection and quiet time in your daily working life? Perhaps it's cycling to work or finding a quiet place in nature for lunch. How can you build in more reflection for yourself and your teams both

weekly and annually to update your thinking?

2 Struggling with an issue

When you think you have exhausted all possible options, let it go, and turn your attention to other things, by leaving your environment, going for a walk or moving to another task. Research shows that your mind will continue to process it even though consciously you are focusing on other things. If then left alone, new perspectives and ideas can arise in your mind.

3 Interpersonal friction

An issue is seldom solved when both parties are in low negative moods as they severely restrict your perspective. Where possible, see these temporary negative thoughts for what they are (often biased and incorrect) and wait for the mood to change before discussing the issue again when you've both had some distance from the problem. This typically opens up both parties to broader perspectives and dampens the negative charge of your initial thoughts.

4 Team projects

We trick ourselves into believing that we have thought of all possible avenues and exhausted all possibilities. Remind yourself that you haven't and never will. Start as a team considering ideas from beyond the domain of the issue; considering other industries, other areas of your life, other experiences. This is why offsites and team development are valuable as people extract themselves from the area of the problem, allowing them to be open to newer thoughts. ✦



Hildegunn Sivertsen
Staff Administrator

"I have been part of the facilitator team since the start-up of the One Team Programme. I have really enjoyed the role, which consists of helping to lead the many workshops and I still feel that I am learning something new, or that I am gaining a new perspective, with every workshop we organize."



Lt. Col. Ferdi Aral, Turkish Army
Head, Quality Assurance Branch

"There were lots of takeaways for me during the One Team Programme, but one in particular was the opportunity to get to know each member of the Joint Warfare Centre (JWC) workforce, beyond their contributions to work. Knowing who I will be working with during my tour here will certainly ease and colour my life both at the JWC and in Norway."



Maj. Marcus Lund, Norwegian Air Force
Deputy Chief Public Affairs Officer

"In my view, the One Team Staff Training Programme, implemented through group workshops, is one that deserves the claim of excellence. This programme is all about good leadership, teamwork, and culture. When Paul and his team bring us together it is to teach us about the 'one team' mindset."



Cdr. Lourens Zijlstra
Royal Netherlands Navy, Chief Grey Cell

"These have been an inspiring few days with Paul and his team making us aware of the many human peculiarities, which were enforced by the multinational environment that the Joint Warfare Centre (JWC) makes up. Although there were many takeaways, I will particularly remember the 'counting the Fs', referring to our blind spots, and the 'assume positive intentions' activities. Keep up the good work; it really contributes to making the JWC more cohesive!"



Chief Petty Officer Elodie Parayre
French Navy, Fund Manager

"This workshop showed how we are all very different, both in terms of cultural differences and the way we think, but also in terms of reactions and priorities. The workshop helped us see these differences as a strength, and that we have many things to learn from each other. I think the topics we discussed during the One Team Programme can be applied both at work and at home."



May Linn Bie
Head, Community Services Section

"The One Team Programme was an invaluable experience, both as a work tool and a way of getting to know people across the organization."



Master Sergeant Julie G. Hansen,
U.S. Air Force, Purchasing & Contracting

"Widening your Joint Warfare Centre (JWC) network is such an invaluable and necessary resource; the One Team Programme allows all instructors and participants to deepen our knowledge of each other for smoother operations later. Knowing a face or remembering a conversation can make all the difference when navigating such a multinational and dynamic work centre like the JWC. Just this September, one of our participants had just the right background that we were able to utilize him for contracting technical team reviews as a subject matter expert. This shortened timelines and really assisted us in everyday work. This was only possible by good conversation and listening during the One Team Programme. Never devalue the power of knowing the right people."



Lt. Col. Fin Walls, UK Royal Marines
Training Advisory Team

"I felt the training was extremely useful and an excellent vehicle to bring the new staff on board this inclusive, supportive, and non-hierarchical organization. The opportunity to talk openly under 'Chatham House' rules stimulated free and honest discussions, while encouraging participants to explore new ideas, and question norms and stereotypes. The exercises were well thought through and had a purpose, which seemed to motivate, albeit subconsciously, the group to perform at their best. Similarly, the various models and tools that were introduced to the team throughout the programme, such as 'the mood elevator', were thought provoking, relevant, and applicable to many situations in which we find ourselves while working at the Joint Warfare Centre. In brief, the One Team training was timely, relevant, and pitched at the right level."