Red Teaming

Yes-Men Are Yesterday's Business

Good decision-making is one of the greatest challenges facing managers and executives today – because their decisions must be made in a state of uncertainty. The rapidness of change in our complex world, combined with both shortages and excesses of information, make "watertight" decisions impossible. So, perhaps more than ever, decisions are made based on subconscious assumptions, stereotypes, and imputations. In order to ensure that quality does not suffer, we have to make ourselves aware of these assumptions and question them. We need constructive troublemakers to stir the pot as "red teams", challenging – and thus helping – their organizations.

Background

The concept of the "red team" has been around since the 19th century. It comes from the Prussian army's *Kriegsspiel* ("war games") that served as training for their officers. One group of officers would, for example, propose a plan of action, and a second group would debate it from the perspective of the enemy. This brought to light any weaknesses or gaps in the plan – enabling it to be improved in advance of the battle. The Prussians would often use wooden blocks to help them visualize the troops. Since their army uniforms were mostly blue, the team proposing the plan of action would be labeled the "blue team" – and the enemy would then be represented by red, thus giving rise to the term "red team". Critical thinking, questioning assumptions, and working with ACH (analysis of competing hypotheses) matrices have formed part of the military's work ever since. "Red Teaming" later took on its modern-day significance – which goes far beyond mere "war games" – in the United States. In 2004, partly as a response to 9/11, the American military established a "Red Team University" with a curriculum geared towards training red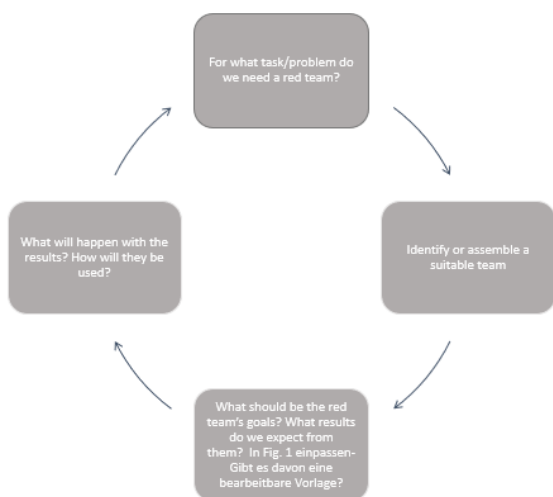 teams. These teams help commanding officers in crisis - and war - zones make good decisions. And because good decisions are also essential to each and every company, the concept of Red Teaming has long found its way into the business world.

Brief description

Red Teaming strengthens independent and critical thinking, challenges "conventional" thought patterns within an organization, develops alternative perspectives, and thus generates alternative options for decision and action. It can help uncover thinking traps that are brought about by prejudices and stereotypes. And last but not least, it helps avoid uniform thinking or groupthink – which is especially noticeable in large organizations and which can often negatively affect the quality of decision-making.

It is important to note that Red Teaming is not a single method that can be used as a blueprint to solve particular problems – but rather is a collection of tools and interventions, psychological knowledge, market understanding, experiences with group dynamic, systemic work procedures, and self-reflection. Debate with other cultural viewpoints is just as essential as is recognizing how

one's own thinking is structured. A red team's toolbox includes such tools as critical thinking, the "5 Whys" technique, playing devil's advocate, outside-in thinking, pre-mortem analysis, ritual dissent, and dialogue circles. And it is not about simply picking one nice tool from the toolbox – but rather is about bolstering the organization by means of a holistic overview. And this only works when certain conditions are met. First of all, a red team needs the full support of the upper management – its work cannot be performed without a clear mandate. In most traditional organizations, getting team members to participate fully in questioning patterns of thinking and decision-making is already a great challenge. Red teamers thus need lots of empathy and tact as well. Also, a red team can only work with a concrete purpose and clear goals (see fig. 1) – it most certainly is not meant to be a permanent presence in the background, taking on a role as an ever-present coach. On the contrary, this would undermine confidence in the team's work and reduce its very purpose to nonsense.

Figure 1 circular diagram:
- For what task/problem do we need a red team?
- Identify or assemble a suitable team
- What should be the red team's goals? What results do we expect from them? In Fig. 1 einpassen- Gibt es davon eine bearbeitbare Vorlage?
- What will happen with the results? How will they be used?

A red team does not necessarily need to be a fixed group. It makes complete sense to assemble different teams depending upon the case, or even to seek assistance from outside the organization; rather, what matters are the qualifications and

experience of the red teamers. And one thing must always be clear: A red team´s objective is meaningful disruption and constructive defiance – so you should expect effects and repercussions.

Applications

Red Teaming is universal – applicable in contexts ranging from the military to government to business. At its core, it is always about fostering good decision-making and improving concrete ideas and actions. Bringing underlying assumptions to light enables us to optimize our plans. Getting different perspectives on our own business facilitates the elaboration of well-tailored strategies. Recognizing strengths and weaknesses in one's own complex working context allows these to be transformed into opportunities. Increasing our understanding of our customers and our competitors enables us to identify unexpected consequences of different actions. Working with future scenarios helps us detect and avoid risks. When implemented properly, Red Teaming also provides us an opportunity to promote new ideas and innovations, as well as conscious, mindful collaboration. By shaking up the organization, it keeps the organization more flexible and adaptive.

"A great many people think they are thinking when they are merely rearranging their prejudices." (William James)

To convey these points more concretely, below is a intervention that you can use for improving plans and ideas.

Example: _"Ritual dissent" (© Cognitive Edge)_

The "ritual dissent" workshop method is geared towards improving plans, strategies, and ideas. Conducting it requires a red teamer who is experienced in moderation and group dynamic to serve as a moderator. Vociferous, energetic discourse often develops among participants; to ensure that the work remains constructive at all times, moderation should remain rigorous, with the moderator keeping the circus under control.

Using this method, colleagues' comments are gathered and processed in successive iterations in order to improve, for example, a plan. This happens immediately on the spot, continuing until the plan is sufficiently good. Ritual dissent is especially well suited for workshops with at least two groups, each of which wants to work on its own plan or idea. With more than six groups, a second moderator absolutely should be brought in.

Procedure

Each group sits at its own table; group sizes of 3-5 participants have proven suitable. Some space should be left between the tables. Generally, each group will have already developed a concept or idea – and now, it's all about putting these to the test and improving them.

1. _Each group chooses a spokesperson_
   The spokespersons should be resilient – because they will have to bear the full force of their colleagues' vigorous feedback. After they each choose a spokesperson, the groups get five minutes to prepare the presentations of their ideas.

2. _The first iterations begin_
   When the preparation time is finished, each spokesperson moves to the next table in a clockwise direction.

3. _The plans are presented_
   Each spokesperson simultaneously presents his idea to the group at the next table. The group simply listens, without interrupting the spokesperson. When the spokesperson finishes his presentation, he turns his chair around and sits with his back to the group.

4. _The groups dissect the plans_
   Each group can (and should) now go all out in tearing apart the idea of the spokesperson to whom they have listened. They should discuss only the idea presented, not the spokesperson himself. The group's comments may be unrealistic, absurd, funny, serious, boisterous. They may talk over and across each other. Each spokesperson merely listens and takes notes; no dialogue may take place between the spokesperson and the group.

5. _Everyone goes back to their own group_
   When each group is done tearing apart the plan of the spokesperson to whom they have listened, each spokesperson returns to his own table. He relays the other group's feedback to his own group, which then revises their idea together. The other groups' feedback often contains very good advice – which sometimes emerges precisely from the most absurd-sounding comments.

6. _Onto the next round_
   Once the plans have been revised, the next iteration begins. Each spokesperson moves to the next table in a counter-clockwise direction.

Experience has shown that three iterations are often necessary – although, depending on the groups and the topics, many more rounds may be required. Depending on the number of groups, each spokesperson should go to a different table during each iteration in order to collect as many ideas as possible. The workshop should end only when each plan or idea has been "perfected" in the eyes of the group that prepared it.

Conclusion

When carrying out the ritual dissent technique, the same principle applies as for the Red Teaming approach generally: There must be a willingness to be disrupted. The basis for this is formed by having an open attitude, a desire to learn and improve one's work, and an awareness of the basic assumptions that underlie our decisions. Without all of this, constructive disruption is impossible. But it is exactly what managers, teams, and organizations need in order to improve their decisions.

"Benefits of Red Teaming"

- Improved understanding of relationships and interactions in complex contexts
- Easier recognition of weaknesses and opportunities
- Preventing groupthink
- Uncovering common thinking traps and avoiding them
- Improved decision-making as a direct result of reflecting upon underlying assumptions
- Identifying undesired or unexpected effects
- Increased number of qualitatively good alternative options for decision and action
- Proactive risk management

"Principles of Red Teaming" box:

- Works only under appropriate conditions
- In order for Red Teaming to be meaningful and effective, an organization must have an open culture of learning. Criticism must be allowed and encouraged.
- Focus on important issues
- Set up red teams only for important, critical, concrete tasks or problems.
- Routine is fatal
- Red Teaming should never become routine – otherwise, team members will fall into the very traps that the organization seeks to escape.
- Being right is not the ultimate goal
- Red teams should not be measured by "correct results" – rather, they are all about stimulating discourse and getting good discussions going.
- Stop when it's enough
- Red teams should be focused on concrete tasks – and should not lose themselves in "finding problems".
- "Don't be an asshole"
- There is sometimes a fine line between constructive disruption and personal attack. Red teamers always keep this in mind, being careful not to get personal.

About the author

Stephanie Borgert is a speaker, management consultant, and forward thinker for a "modern" management approach. She helps managers, directors, and project leaders become "masters of complexity" and not leave their success to chance.

Recommended reading

Uncomplicated! The Workbook for Complex Thinking and Action in Agile Businesses by Stephanie Borgert

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