



Gen. Darryl Williams (*right center*), commanding general of U.S. Army Europe and Africa and commander of the NATO Land Command, discusses mission command execution with senior officers from NATO's Headquarters Allied Rapid Reaction Corps on 18 October 2023 during Steadfast Jupiter 2023 in Romania. Steadfast Jupiter is a multinational exercise designed to demonstrate the ability to execute the Deterrence and Defense of the Euro-Atlantic Area integrated plans across twenty-four multinational headquarters elements consisting of approximately seven thousand troops. (Photo by Staff Sgt. Kyle Larsen, U.S. Army)

Creating Strategic Problem Solvers

Lt. Gen. Milford H. Beagle Jr., U.S. Army

Lt. Col. Tom Gaines, U.S. Army

In the latest edition of the Army War College journal *Parameters*, Andrew Carr argues that the rising level of complexity in the world necessitates a change in how we define strategy away from a math problem of *ends + ways + means* and instead look

to strategy as problem-solving.¹ Carr's idea is that as the amount of complexity in a situation increases, the strategy should be less focused on long-term end states and more focused on diagnosing and solving complex problems. As the Army continues transforming to

meet evolving threats on the battlefield, it is meeting with levels of complexity that surpass previous experience. To win, the Army must train leaders to become strategic problem solvers who create new approaches and reimagine the future fight. But how does it do that? How do leaders get creative? How does one imagine a new future and translate that vision into a new plan?

to be great at asking questions, it is a skill that you can strengthen through practice. Here's an exercise to help. Ask a colleague about the reason they joined the Army. Gather all the details you can without judging or speculating. Ask what, where, who, when, how, but *do not* ask why. Once you have all the details, hypothesize your colleague's deep reason—their why—for joining the

“ The operational environment is constantly evolving, and many of the solutions that were once suitable no longer work because their underlying assumptions no longer hold true. ”

These are great questions, and if you are asking these questions, then you're already on the right path. At its core, creativity is inextricably linked to curiosity—that deep-seated desire to understand the world around you. Successful leaders are generally curious and have learned to ask great questions.² They want to know about themselves, their teammates, their environment, and their competitors. They constantly challenge their own underlying assumptions about how they see the world out of a genuine interest in understanding the people and events around them. To drive strategic problem-solving at the level the Army needs to successfully transform, leaders need to start unleashing their sense of curiosity.

The operational environment is constantly evolving, and many of the solutions that were once suitable no longer work because their underlying assumptions no longer hold true. Leaders who are not curious fail to see this evolution, discounting it as random noise as they try to reduce the data to fit their existing categories and models.³ Leaders who are curious, though, will lean into the change to figure out what it could mean for their organization.

Giant battleships once dominated the seas with progressively bigger and better guns until an airplane landed on a ship, rewriting the rules of naval warfare.⁴ When that happened, every naval leader on the planet was thrust into a period of disruptive transformation. Some simply did not realize it.

The good news is that human beings are curious by nature, so even if you don't currently consider yourself

Army. If they agree with your hypothesis, you did well. If they agree *and* are surprised by it, you did great. If you didn't guess correctly, you jumped too fast to why. Ask for more details next time and hold more of that person in mind.

Why delay asking why when causal reasoning—your ability to form hypotheses when presented with new information—is one of the things that has made humans so successful as a species? Because if you start by asking why, you will base your answers on your existing rules and biases. By starting with other questions, you allow yourself space to gather more information about what is unique and exceptional about your colleague rather than reducing them to the mean of your standing mental models. To see an example of this, look at our current doctrine on human intelligence. In the back of the manual is a list of questions made specifically for intelligence professionals responsible for understanding the plans and intentions of our adversaries.⁵ Less than 5 percent of those questions start with why. Although Simon Sinek makes a compelling case for using why as the starting point for building new plans, the path to why is paved with other questions.⁶

Now that you've engaged your curiosity and started noticing the signals of change in the environment, the next step is to see the challenges and opportunities in the change. Doing so requires vision—the power to create and communicate a new story of the future. That ability to create a plan and share it with others is the defining characteristic of a leader. Unfortunately, humans are not particularly good at predicting the

future.⁷ This is especially true when their environment is filled with complexity, uncertainty, and volatility, upending the status quo.⁸ The reason your predictions fail so often comes down to the fact that your default views of the future tend to be extensions of your biases, hopes, and fears; that is, what you hope happens, what you fear will happen, or what your unconscious biases say will happen. Think about the wargames your organization held during military decision-making processes. If your unit is like most, you focused on two scenarios: the enemy's most likely course of action, and the enemy's most dangerous course of action. Put differently, what does your bias tell you the enemy will do, and what do you fear the enemy will do? The

problem is that neither of these are likely to end up correct.

The key to envisioning new possibilities uncoupled from bias is found in another mental superpower humans possess—counterfactual thinking. Returning to the power of the question, counterfactual thinking is the ability for humans to ask *what if* and to let your imagination work. Just like asking other questions, this skill can be strengthened through practice. Here is another exercise to help. Take a scenario

Lt. Gen. Milford Beagle Jr., U.S. Army, is the commanding general of the U.S. Army Combined Arms Center on Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, where he is responsible for integrating the modernization of the fielded Army across doctrine, organization, training, materiel, leadership, personnel, facilities, and policy. He has served in multiple leadership capacities from platoon through division levels, and his career deployments span the globe from Hawaii to the Republic of Korea. He previously served as the commanding general of 10th Mountain Division (Light). He holds a BS from South Carolina State University, an MS from Kansas State University, an MS from the School of Advanced Military Studies, and an MS from the Army War College.

Lt. Col. Tom Gaines, U.S. Army, is the G-6 for 1st Special Forces Command. His writing on human creativity, decision-making, and technology can be found in *Harvard Business Review* and West Point's Modern War Institute.

from an upcoming training event or news coming out of one of the conflicts around the world and run through possibilities of what could happen, good or bad. What is something unexpected but plausible? What actions might different actors, including you, take in the situation and what happens as a result? Don't downplay or exclude anything that comes to mind and be open to extreme futures. The point is not to try to guess correctly but rather to expand the range of possible futures you see unfolding. Some will hold opportunities, others risk.

Now that you've seen more of the possibilities, you are better prepared to create a plan to shape the future. Just like with predicting future events, however, our ability to create new plans can be stifled by our biases and fears. To make matters worse, the first plan that comes to your mind is also likely to be the first thing that your adversaries think of. How, then, do you come up with a second plan? How do you unlock your innate creativity to build a new plan? How can you turn that situation to your benefit, and what are the first steps you need to take to set that in motion? The most important thing is to remember your objective—that one thing that you must accomplish for your mission to be successful. It doesn't matter how great or novel your idea is if it is not aligned toward your purpose. That's randomness, not creativity.

Once you have your purpose clearly in mind, shift your perspective. Think about someone you know very well—your parents, a close friend, or maybe even the colleague you learned about during the first exercise. Think about what makes them unique as individuals and how they approach problems. Now, imagine what plan they might create were they in this situation. As with counterfactual thinking, the goal is not to correctly predict how they would respond to a situation but rather to get out of your own head and grow your perspective.

Will the plan you create be perfect? Unlikely, but as both Helmuth von Moltke the Elder and Mike Tyson famously note, no plan survives first contact with the enemy.⁹ Fortunately, with the time you invested in understanding the situation and thinking through possible futures, you will already have some idea of how to respond as events unfold. This is what President Dwight Eisenhower meant when he said, "Plans are worthless, but planning is everything."¹⁰ Winning the first fight is not about devising the perfect plan and executing

it flawlessly. It is about learning and adapting to the environment and the situation, action–reaction–counteraction. The creativity to thrive in that environment abounds in our leaders and formations. We just must develop, embrace, and empower it. Despite the fanfare surrounding the rollout of the big five weapon systems that accompanied the transformation to AirLand

Battle in the early 1980s, Gen. Donn Starry noted that it wasn't a second technological offset that mattered. Instead, to win, units needed the kind of organizational leadership that draws from the strength of the organization itself.¹¹ The single most effective weapon of the next war will not be a drone, tank, or missile. It will be an American soldier with a second plan. ■

Notes

1. Andrew Carr, "Strategy as Problem-Solving," *Parameters* 54, no. 1 (Spring 2024): 123–37.
2. John C. Maxwell, *Good Leaders Ask Great Questions: Your Foundation for Successful Leadership* (New York: Hachette, 2014), 3.
3. Bob Johansen, *Full-Spectrum Thinking: How to Escape Boxes in a Post-Categorical Future* (Oakland, CA: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2020), 22.
4. Williamson R. Murray and Allan R. Millett, *Military Innovation in the Interwar Period* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2007), chap. 5.
5. Field Manual 2-22.3, *Human Intelligence Collector Operations* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2006), app. G.
6. Simon Sinek, *Start with Why: How Great Leaders Inspire Everyone to Take Action* (London: Portfolio, 2011), 53–63.
7. Philip E. Tetlock and Dan Gardner, *Superforecasting: The Art and Science of Prediction* (New York: Crown, 2015), 5.
8. Hugh Courtney, Jane Kirkland, and Patrick Viguerie, "Strategy under Uncertainty," *Harvard Business Review*, November–December 1997, <https://hbr.org/1997/11/strategy-under-uncertainty>.
9. Helmuth von Moltke, *Kriegsgeschichtliche Einzelschriften* [Individual writings on war history] (Berlin: E. S. Mittler und Sohn, 1897), 45.
10. Dwight D. Eisenhower, "Remarks at the National Defense Executive Reserve Conference, 14 November 1957," American Presidency Project, accessed 8 April 2024, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/remarks-the-national-defense-executive-reserve-conference>.
11. Donn A. Starry, *Press On! Selected Works of General Donn A. Starry*, ed. Lewis Sorley, vol. 1 (Fort Leavenworth, KS: Combat Studies Institute Press, September 2009), 501.