



U.S. Army Soldiers assigned to 3rd Brigade Combat Team, 4th Infantry Division, scan the battlefield for possible enemy combatants during Decisive Action Rotation 16-09 at the National Training Center in Fort Irwin, California, Sept. 2, 2016. (U.S. Army photo by Sgt. Christopher Blanton)

# Project Athena in Action

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*“Future leaders must be adept at operating in ambiguity and chaos while possessing technical and professional expertise that enables cognitive overmatch of the enemy.”* Department of the Army, 2019a, p. 8-4

**T**he complexity of the contemporary operating environment, where modern conflicts will be fought, is defined by chaos and ambiguity. Peer, near-peer, and nonstate actors continue to threaten American interests at home and abroad in all operational domains. This creates leadership challenges our force has never experienced but must be prepared to defend against. The operational variables demand change, and that change is here in the form of Project Athena.

Project Athena is a confidential, progressive, and sequential battery of assessments to assist Soldiers in developing self-awareness and self-development, which “is the ultimate way to customize improvement to the

needs of the individual” (Masaracchia et al., 2021, p. 8). This is accomplished through several aspects, but our main focus is on the three Project Athena assessments: the Sensemaking Assessment, the Army Critical Thinking Test, and the Systems Thinking Assessment.

## Turning Theory into Action

The theoretical application of Project Athena looks very promising, but how does that translate to concrete actions? The intricacies of conducting stability operations in an urban area such as Baghdad are complex due to “numerous factors such as location” (Department of the Army, 2013, p. vii), which creates many difficult lead-

ership challenges. This is where the three Project Athena assessments can greatly benefit units on the ground, as shown in the real-world example below:

*You are a field artillery platoon sergeant conducting a nonstandard mission in Baghdad to provide stability to the local population while legitimate host nation authorities establish civil governance. An insurgent cell is operating in your area of operations (AO) and disrupting lines of communications (LOCs) by emplacing improvised explosive devices (IEDs) along major and secondary routes. You must keep the LOCs open while safeguarding military forces and the civilian population.*

This scenario clearly demonstrates a complex leadership challenge, a challenge that the assessments in Project Athena can help with. The following sections will look at the sensemaking, critical thinking, and systems thinking assessments and how they create self-development and self-awareness in today's Soldiers.

### **Sensemaking**

Sensemaking is defined as “a deliberate, iterative effort to create understanding in complex situations – to assess a situation and draw conclusions based on cues, given conditions, and the context of a situation” (“Athena,” 2021, para. 6). In the above insurgent scenario, the complexity of the situation is obvious, and Sensemaking can enable a leader to (1) determine the insurgent attacks are not random (but designed to generate political change by inflicting harm upon military and civilian populations) and (2) understand the social, political, and economic factors fueling the insurgents and influencing the local population.

In addition, the combination of intuition and experience can be very powerful in Sensemaking and effective decision-making as well. ADP 6-22 states, “Competent and confident leaders make sense of their experience and use it to learn more about themselves” (Department of the Army, 2019a, p. 6-3).

### **Critical Thinking**

The Army defines critical thinking as “...thinking in new, innovative ways using imagination, insight, and different ideas. Leaders often face unfamiliar problems or old problems requiring new solutions” (Department of the Army, 2019b, p. 2-5). This definition, and its importance to warfare, leads to the next assessment, the Army Critical Thinking Test.

When applied to the insurgent scenario, the importance of critical thinking becomes apparent. To combat this type of threat, it is important to understand the five Ws and how they apply.

1. Who are the key players?
2. What is the real problem?
3. Why are the key players doing what they're doing?
4. When are the key players actively conducting operations?
5. Where are the key players and where do they conduct business?

Once an objective understanding has been achieved, then integration can take place to develop conclusions and make decisions. But critical thinking alone will not accomplish the mission. Understanding an individual situation is important, but to affect lasting change on the operating environment, it is vital to understand the “big picture.”

### **Systems Thinking**

Systems thinking, in its simplest terms, is all about identifying the people (population), places (terrain), and things (infrastructure) that enable a system to perform its function and then acting to disrupt any or all of those elements. The Systems Thinking Assessment in Project Athena focuses on the “participant’s use of patterns in temporal, spatial, social, technical, and cultural dimensions” (“Athena,” 2021, para. 8).

Thus, for the above scenario, we can identify the people, the insurgents and the logistical personnel who support the main actors. We then identify the places/locations where attacks occur, where the insurgents prepare the IEDs, and where they meet to plan attacks (safe houses). And lastly, we identify the things required to conduct the attacks such as the IEDs (what type, where they are made, etc.; how they are transported and emplaced, when they were donated and on whom (pattern analysis)).

Once you identify this information, you can begin to understand the adversary’s operations, predict what they will do next, and develop plans to stop them.

### **Conclusion**

The goal of Project Athena is to generate self-awareness and self-development by using the three lines of effort (assessment feedback, performance coaching, and the Individual Development Plan); and the three Project Athena assessments (the Sensemaking Assessment, the Army Critical Thinking Test, and the Systems Thinking Assessment).

By developing confident, competent, and agile leaders capable of defeating any adversary, Project Athena can generate understanding and assist in the decision-making process at all levels, ultimately increasing the probability for successful operations in any operational environment. ■

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