

How to optimize data collection through friendliness

There are times when re-reading texts you have read before still enables you to generate new insights. This happened to me recently when I revisited the Seven Principles of Knowledge Management¹.

To limit the scope of this blog, I will introduce you to just one of these principles. I will choose one that has directly influenced decisions I subsequently made. To me applicability is the hallmark of a useful theory. Hence, I assumed that the way I benefitted from this theory may be indicative of how you may benefit from it as well. Therefore, I invite you to join me on my voyage of discovery. The principle is:

“Knowledge can only be volunteered; it cannot be conscripted”

The principle, even though it sounds rather straightforward, hit me like a rock when I thought about it. *Knowledge can only be volunteered; it cannot be conscripted*. In other words: your human source *must be willing* to give his data or knowledge to you as data/intelligence collector.

Intelligence of course is an associative business. Thus, when I read the principle, I couldn't help but connect this principle to the main conclusion of an analysis on the common characteristics of today's best collectors in military intelligence which I also read recently:

The best collectors of intelligence stand out in friendliness².

What is true for our distant cousins in the military I believe to hold equally true for us in business. A human source will *only* give a collector what *she wants to give*. This is mostly determined by how she relates to you as collector. No wonder friendliness is a collector's virtuous feature.

As a collector of intelligence, you will never be able to know what else your source knows that might be of value for your analysis. Only the source knows what she knows, and she determines what you get out of her data treasure trove. If the source is constructive due to your friendliness and offers you enough of her precious time, the results are of course still dependent on your questions and probing techniques.

Friendliness can be used to stop the cascade

The principle of kindness is not only relevant in one-on-one meetings but also in group decision-making. Good decisions are preferably based on all available data, collected from all members of the group. A common problem in group decision-making is, however, that individual members do not share all relevant data. This is usually a result of less-than-optimal group processes.

A common version of a faulty group process is called the 'cascade'³. In a group that is about to take some decision, a strong leader decisively speaks first. The leader may not have had all available data, but still hints at a clear decision. The second speaker is usually an ally of the leader and supports the leader's views, adding no new data. The cascade builds up with more and more support for a decision, but without an increasingly broad foundation of data to support the decision.

How strong a personality would it take to break the cascade? What sort of credibility would be required for new data to make such a difference at this point in the meeting that it would challenge the wisdom of the decision proposed by the leader and first speaker? And thinking from the perspective of friendliness, what would be the difference if the first speaker were to be friendly and invite all participants to share their knowledge, prior to moving towards decision-making?

As intelligence collectors and analysts, we want our sources to share the data and knowledge we need. For this to happen, we have to create a climate which is conducive to sharing, whether we're talking about one-on-one interactions or group meetings. Let us face it: when a touch of friendliness is what it takes, it shouldn't be too hard to improve your intelligence collection and based on this, your management's subsequent decision-making.

Notes:

- .1. Snowden, D. [2002], Complex Acts of Knowing; Paradox and Descriptive Self-awareness, *Journal of Knowledge Management*, 6, no. 2 (May) pp. 1-14.
- .2. Grey, S. [2016], *The new spymasters – inside espionage from the cold war to global terror*, Penguin Books, London.
- .3. Sunstein, C.R., Hastie, R. [2015], *Wiser – getting beyond groupthink to make groups smarter*, Harvard Business Review Press, Boston, MA, pp. 57-75.