

A Set-based approach to Operational Planning – or five principles for Flexecution

Western planning doctrines¹ aim to stimulate what Kahneman refers to as “thinking slow”. Despite their good intentions, these doctrines seem to fail to produce better plans than their less time-consuming alternatives, based on naturalistic decision making (NDM)². This paper suggests that our current planning doctrines unintentionally repress the true complexity of:

- i. *A conflict or a crisis*
- ii. *Information diffusion*³

This paper returns to the wisdom of Moltke, Clausewitz and Churchill to downplay the plan as a product and emphasize the process of planning. Planning should be a way of *marinating yourself and your team in a context*. This leads to the emergence of the recognition of a set (repertoire) of patterns and contextual understanding that could be more effective in theatre. Addressing uncertainty, *planning* and *orientation* are two vital functions that need to be iterated in what Klein labels *flexecution*⁴. This is a way of thinking where we focus on a continuous movement to a more desirable state within an *infinite game*⁵ mindset, rather than focusing on a predefined *End State*. The Set-based approach is summarised in the five principles below.

1. **Empathize with your enemy**⁶ - Our red teaming events are too shallow to really let the planning teams empathise with enemies/opponents/victims in order to find a balanced approach in a complex environment.
2. **Go from product to process**⁷ - Comprehensive and time-consuming planning guidance and pre-specified formats make it hard for planning teams to:
 - i. to understand the underlying mechanisms that are intended to dampen our *biases*, *noise* and *groupthink*. Without this understanding, the planners risk getting stuck in *rain dance like behaviour*, filling in the gaps in pre-specified formats instead of sense-making. Avoiding such biases puts the emphasises back on the process rather than *falling in love with your plan*.
 - ii. to remove, add or recombine tools and methods depending on the context.
3. **Expand the set**⁸ - Instead of converging the problem and then the solution, in a *design thinking/double diamond approach*, keep all options open as long as possible. Initially only determine the first move in theatre and adapt from there using our repertoire of patterns and making new ones as you go, just like in sports. This in our continuous strive for *requisite variety*.

¹ In example: NATO COPD, UK AJP-5 and Sweden’s SPL 2017

² Thunholm, P. (2003). Military Decision Making Under Time-pressure

³ Boisot, Max & MacMillan, Ian & Han, Kyeong. (2007). Property Rights and Information Flows: A Simulation Approach. *Journal of Evolutionary Economics*. 17. 63-93. 10.1007/s00191-006-0031-7.

⁴ Klein, Gary. (2007). Flexecution as a Paradigm for Replanning, Part 1. *Intelligent Systems, IEEE*. 22. 79-83. 10.1109/MIS.2007.4338498.

⁵ Carse, James P. (1987). *Finite and Infinite Games*. New York: Ballantine Books. ISBN 978-0-345-34184-6.

⁶ Morris, E. (Director). (2003a). *The fog of war: Eleven lessons from the life of Robert S. McNamara* [Motion picture]. United States: Sony Pictures Classics.

⁷ A paraphrasing of the title to Mik Kerstens book, *From project to product*, (2018)

⁸ Term from Allen Ward’s book: *Lean Product and Process Development*. LEI. p. 3. ISBN 978-1934109137.

4. **If you build it, you run it**⁹ - the overall aim with planning is to *marinate you and your team in a context* and possible futures. Those involved in the planning, *marinating process*, can't be separated from those going into theatre.
5. **No more fire & forget directives** - In a Set-based approach all levels need to be connected from the top down and committed to fulfilling the agility needed to cope with uncertainty. This is intended to minimise the *transaction costs* of change. Otherwise, the resources in theatre risk being trapped in a hammer and nail syndrome, efficiently doing the wrong thing. This is what we ultimately want to avoid.

⁹ A quote from Amazon CTO Werner Vogels (2006) <https://queue.acm.org/detail.cfm?id=1142065>