Drivers, Scenarios, and Policy

A Guide to Producing ACTIONABLE INTELLIGENCE

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This manual is derived from material that I initially designed for classes at the *Máster Interuniversitario en Analista de Inteligencia* at the *Universidad Rey Juan Carlos* in Madrid, Spain. I later adapted much of it for Skills Institutes at American University (Washington, DC) and Syracuse University's "Maxwell in DC" program. I have used key elements in courses in Barcelona, Mexico, Cuba, and Central America.

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Introduction

Most of us have a strong desire — and deep need — for analysis in our personal, community, and national lives. We want to know *what*'s happening, *why* it's happening, and *what we can do* to make things better or easier or more comfortable.

- When we take a bus, train, or Metro, we want to know *when* the next one is arriving, *why* it's late, and *how* a delay will affect our schedules.
- When we go to a doctor, we want to know *why* we feel bad and *how* we can feel better.
- When our car isn't running well, we want to know *what* the problem is, *how* it can be fixed, and *how much* it will cost.
- When national inflation is eating away at our savings, when international relations are causing humanitarian crises, when war between two far-off countries threatens supplies of energy, microchips, and food ... we want to know what's driving those events and what our governments can do to reverse them.

From little issues to big, we want analysis of what's going on around us so that we can change the situation or, at least, adapt to it.

Some people think that analysis is magic or mysterious, like reading tarot cards or palms. We who do analysis know that it's not. We don't do it in a black box and, although computer technology can sometimes help, we don't do it with an app. It is not artificial intelligence; rather, it is driven by human

intelligence, information, and values.

This manual assumes that we all do analysis, and it strives to make that analysis more conscious, more rich, and (hopefully) more accurate.

ACTIONABLE INTELLIGENCE

This manual presents and practices a model for developing, writing, and briefing **actionable intelligence** — information that helps people, including ourselves, make better decisions.

What is analysis?

The word "analysis" is all around us. We use it to signify the results of the process we undertake to understand something — collating information about it, exploring the reasons behind it, and anticipating how it will change. Therapists analyze people. Labs analyze blood. Talking heads on cable TV analyze world events (even if it often feels more like they're expressing opinions). Meteorologists analyze the chance of rain. Investors analyze the markets.

Even in the world of intelligence, the word is used to describe widely varying activities. The product of an all-source, multidisciplinary, strategic analyst is different from that of a operations-support analyst or a "targeting" analyst involved in, for example, identifying terrorists, narcotics producers and smugglers, human traffickers, and other nefarious types involved in activities that governments want to shut down. Traditional strategic analysts often look down on "targeteers" as being involved in operations more akin to police or military work — arresting, hindering, or even killing their prey. They say targeteers' product helps security forces play the carnival game Whac-A-Mole, in which operators use a bat to hit a toy animal when it sticks its head above ground. But that too requires analysis: Where will the mole appear next, in what pattern, at what speed?

But, to be fair, the analytical processes — evaluating

information, arranging it in a meaningful fashion, and providing it to decisionmakers clearly and concisely — are not all that different. Experts may be more specialized in different areas, but we wouldn't say that a pathologist, who analyzes our illnesses, or a paleontologist, who analyzes fossils, is any less an analyst in their area than the vaunted strategic analyst, would we?

The Actionable Intelligence Model

The model of analysis that this manual presents has almost universal application and, if not immediately applicable to analysts' and policymakers' needs, is flexible enough that you can modify it to produce excellent, actionable intelligence for practically any enterprise. It presents good tradecraft practices that make any analytic endeavor you undertake better.

The model starts with understanding your consumers' needs — which is often different from what they *want* — and proceeds through a series of steps that incrementally build hypotheses and test them, identify areas in which situations can change, examine outcomes, and discuss why it all matters.

- It's not a linear process — it doesn't follow a rigid set of steps; it's more of a spiral that develops new insights with each turn of the worm, which makes the product richer and more agile for your decisionmakers. In the end, of course, you present the analysis in a form that's concise, unambiguous, and readily digestible by your consumers.

One last thought before we start: The tradecraft — the disciplined application of good practices to make good analysis — is mostly just common sense. Our value-added as analysts is not diminished by that. Indeed, common sense is a precious (and rare in some contexts) commodity in decisionmaking, and a product that validates common sense and makes it actionable is, in itself, a valuable contribution to any issue.

The more *conscious* our analytical processes — our common sense — the richer the result.

WHERE DID THIS MODEL COME FROM?

No one individual can claim credit for many of the elements of the analytical model presented in this manual. Much of it embodies ideas and practices that many analysts have developed over the years. As a CIA analyst, I learned some elements from the work of the Agency's three pioneering methodologists.

- **Richards (Dick) J. Heuer**, a CIA officer who became an analyst after 24 years of field operations and assembled a great collection of best practices for himself and colleagues. His book *Psychology of Intelligence Analysis* is a classic.[1]
- **Sherman Kent**, a Yale professor whose work in analytical methodology during World War II laid the groundwork for the concept of intelligence analysis as a profession. Kent emphasized knowing policymakers' needs while steering clear of their infighting. He was known for having no patience for analysts' biases of any kind.
- **Jack Davis**, a career analyst, built on Heuer and Kent's work and added concepts about "alternative analysis." He promoted the concept of "opportunity analysis" — showing policymakers ways to promote, rather than just defend or do damage-control on, their interests.

I have synthesized their models and honed them, I believe, into a process that represents the highest common denominator among good analysts I've seen and known over the years, based on my experience in analytical, policy, and adjunct professorial positions.

- I was a consumer of analysis during years on the U.S. National Security Council staff, at the State Department, and on the staff of the U.S. Senate Foreign Relations Committee. At each place, I saw how good analysis helped, and bad analysis hindered, effective policymaking.

While I admire students who pursue university majors and

[1] *Psychology of Intelligence Analysis*, Chapter Five (https://www.cia.gov/library/center-for-the-study-of-intelligence/csi-publications/books-and-monographs/psychology-of-intelligence-analysis/art8.html)

degrees in intelligence analysis, I also believe that we don't have to study analysis or political science or economics or statistics in school to be a good analyst. In fact, our time might be better spent learning about the substance of life, such as history, rather than various tools for understanding it.

- I studied linguistics in college and benefited from my professors' analysis of language and its role in thought, society, and culture. I worked as a reporter and editor, and saw good practices there. As a Congressional staffer for an amazing member of the House of Representatives, I witnessed how he sorted out the chaff to make clear analytical points in an environment not often known for being analytical. As a CIA analyst, where I toiled for the biggest chunk of my career, I was subjected daily to challenges that forced me to sharpen my skills. At CIA I was also exposed to concepts such as "drivers" and "Structured Analytic Techniques" — some of which helped me when I was National Intelligence Officer for Latin America.[2]

What's the value of analysis?

But one of the great epiphanies for me came when I was working in a policy position, not as analyst, as a director for Latin America Affairs on the U.S. National Security Council (1995-97 and 1998-99). When I was chatting one day with Sandy Berger, Deputy National Security Advisor (and later full advisor), he commented how he appreciated the analytical approach that I and another CIA career officer, who was working on the Middle East, brought to our work. "You guys seem to know that, if we can get agreement on the problem, it puts us 80 percent of the way toward agreement on a policy."

More than that, in that job I realized one of the big secrets of decisionmaking in government, in the private sector, and even in our private lives. The secret is that the *best* contribution of *good* analysis is that it identifies the "drivers" — the underlying causes — of the problems that we are seeking to address. Just as a doctor who merely treats symptoms isn't worth much to their patients, a policymaker who doesn't grasp the *reasons* behind a challenge probably isn't going to adopt the right policies to deal with it.

[2] The National Intelligence Officers (NIOs) sit on the National Intelligence Council (NIC), which is charged with leading analysis in various regions and specialties, and helping the entire intelligence community employ good "analytical tradecraft," which we will discuss in detail. My four years as NIO coincided, however, with some of our greatest intelligence failures such as the debacle surrounding the estimate about Iraq weapons of mass destruction.

- When analysts do their job well, they provide a roadmap of how the *drivers* of a situation are steering it toward one bad scenario or other, and in so doing, show the policymakers where they can, at least conceivably, change the outcome. We can't change the future if we don't know what's driving it.
- The policy logic is simple: change the drivers, and you change the outcome. There's no guarantee, of course, that our decisionmakers are willing and able to change the drivers, but at least we analysts can show them where they can try.

That's what actionable analysis is all about. Over the years, I've studied analytical tradecraft and, based on my experiences in the Intelligence Community, State Department, White House, and Capitol Hill, seen how the best practices employed by good analysts of any discipline can have a profound impact.

THE BOTTOM LINE UP FRONT
"The BLUF"

One tenet of good, actionable analysis is that it start with a clear "Bottom Line Up Front" statement. Here's this manual's BLUF:

Actionable analysis, to support good policy ...

- Considers the NEEDS of the decisionmakers in the areas that we cover.
- Identifies the DRIVERS (the "why" and "how") of a problem or opportunity.
- Examines the TRENDS of each driver ("how it's evolving in essence and in impact").
- Develops the most likely and less likely SCENARIOS those drivers and trends point to.
- Considers WILD CARDS and challenges "assumptions" to ensure the completeness and balance of the analysis.
- Spells out the IMPLICATIONS or consequences of each scenario.

This is done by ...

- Understanding what your consumer needs — the information they need — and translating it into an analytical question and sub-questions, and being aware of their realistic options for dealing with the issue. We also need to understand their need to *appear* to be dealing with the problem.
- Finding and checking information.
- Identifying the basics of who, what, when, and where.
- Formulating hypotheses about the how and why.
- Testing the hypotheses and modifying them as information and logic require.
- Preparing your findings in as concise, clear, helpful manner as possible.

And ... you're done!

WHAT IS ANALYSIS?
(In a little more detail)

There's an old story from India about four blind men and an elephant. There are many drawings of them, each touching a different part of the animal in an effort to find out what it is. Each says what they feel: holding the trunk, one pronounces the animal to be like a giant snake; holding a leg, another says it's like the trunk of a palm tree; holding an ear, it's like a big fan; holding the tail, it's like a rat. Another version, with five blind men, has the tusks as spears, the animal's side as a wall, and its tail as a rope.

They were good observers but bad analysts. Each assumed that the part they touched represented the whole. And each canceled the observations of the others. "You're all wrong," the one holding the tail said, "It's like a rat."

What is your goal as analyst?

Good analysis requires equal consideration, at least in the initial stages of a project, of all information. As you look at issues, you can cancel others' views only with evidence.

Many people conflate the words "analysis" and "intelligence" because their definitions overlap. In many people's everyday speech, the word "analysis" is often used for information that varies from simple compilation, arranged by date or source, or has something in common (e.g., kinds of automobiles on the road). The word "intelligence" is used with two meanings — one referring to clandestinely collected information ("spy reports," intercepted communications, satellite pictures, etc.), and the other referring to mental acumen and agility.[3]

- In this manual, the word **"analysis"** signifies information that you evaluate for accuracy, put into context, and communicate in a clear manner that helps people make decisions. Good analysis is, indeed, a high-end **intelligence** product even if it is not based on clandestine information. This is fitting; when one thinks of an intelligent person, for example, it's of a person who has a good idea of what's happening, why it's happening, how it will evolve, and why we should care.

[3] In government intelligence organizations, these are referred to as human intelligence (HUMINT), signals intelligence (SIGINT), and imagery intelligence (IMINT). There are other, more specialized INTs as well. MASINT, for example, uses various techniques to assess the "signatures" of various substances in an area of operations, such as the emissions of a factory.

What are we trying to fix?

As noted above, analysis does not come from a "black box" that you cannot look into. It is not a hunch or a "gut feeling," even if a hunch or feeling can help you formulate hypotheses based on interpretations of your information. It is certainly not a "foregone conclusion." Instead, it's the product of a conscious, transparent, deliberate process.

Good analysis requires that you make good practices more *conscious*.

You can start by examining why you, your organization, or your government make mistakes — and then try to address the problems. Do they (and you) make mistakes because they (and you) ...

- have bad or inadequate information?
- really don't understand the meaning and consequences of the issue they're looking at?
- are unable or unwilling to take on new info?
- have a conflict of interest about the issue and don't want to see an outcome that's incompatible with their wishes?
- are under too much pressure — such as from your organization — to accept one particular interpretation of the information?
- are unable to communicate the info and analysis in a manner that helps decisionmakers grasp them?

More than one or two of these questions might trigger a yes answer on many of the issues you look at in our national, community, and even personal lives. Have you ever bought something about which you had bad information? Or you didn't want to hear information that did not support your *desire* to buy it? Or because a family member pressured you too hard?

The purpose of this manual is to show you ways to overcome the many possible obstacles to delivering an actionable product — an analysis that increases the chance of *right* decisions. It will make you more aware of how you're processing information in your jobs and lives. When you read the daily news about this complex world you live in, you will begin to analyze it. You will see problems in your community — potholes in the street, traffic jams, poor bus service — as having causes and effects that you can analyze. Maybe you can improve your personal decisionmaking, too.

These skills are arguably more important than ever. Our societies, institutions, and brains are flooded with information about issues needing analysis.

- Issues of war and peace have been around forever, but challenges like climate change and pandemics are very complex and have a profound impact on lives. Faith in institutions and old "truths" is wavering, so the "rules of play" are shifting. Information flies so fast that people, organizations, and countries are reacting to events before they are even clear.
- Making things worse, a lot of the information swarming around issues is *misinformation*, which is simply wrong even if well-intentioned, and *disinformation*, which is deliberately manipulated to influence us to take action that we wouldn't take with accurate information. Technologies now enable malign forces to run "bots" pumping out millions of messages with false information. They empower people to make "deep fake" videos that burrow so deeply into our brains that we can't pull them back out. Artificial intelligence can write any argument in any voice that it is commanded to, with a particular target audience in mind.

People need analysts — you — to help them navigate this storm. They need your analysis to sort fact from fiction, right from wrong, and good actions from bad.

What traps do analysts often step into?

The word "intelligence failure" applies to a broad array of situations in which organizations fail to predict events that wind up hindering their interests. In Washington, where the competition to take credit for good results — and avoid blame for bad — can be intense, there's an old joke that says, "Policy successes are to policymakers' credit; policy failures are the intelligence and analytical community's fault."

Intelligence failures happen for a number of reasons. Often it's because information isn't available, or analysts don't see it, or it is well hidden from them.[4] The processes in this manual, however, will help you to take steps to reduce the chances that you as *analysts* fail. They address problems that fall into two general categories.

Obstacles in the Analyst's Mind - including biases that keep them from seeing other, possibly more accurate, interpretations of events. These psychological obstacles and cognitive biases include:

Confirmation bias, which leads analysts to agree with things they already believe. (This is the most common bias of all.)
Example: An analyst readily believes a report that a killing was done by a religious radical because he/she believes that religious radicals are always the most likely culprits.

Value or normative bias, which confuses moral judgments (including those based on perceptions of superiority or inferiority) with analytical judgments. It can lead analysts to agree with other analyses that reflect their values or desired outcome.
Example: An analyst judges that a government that does not encourage western-style capitalism will not necessarily enjoy sustained economic growth.

Mirror-imaging, which assumes that other countries and organizations have the same values and mental processes as the analyst's. It's sometimes called rationality bias or coherence bias.
Example: An analyst judges that a foreign government is not going to invade a neighbor because it would be a

[4] "Denial and deception" is what we call the measures that humans — practically all of us — take to keep people from knowing what we're doing or thinking. Denial includes covering things up like camouflage. Deception runs from the simple — such as lying — to brilliantly complex steps to cover, spin, conceal, and divert attention.

"crazy" act (because the analyst's country would never do it).

Hindsight bias, which is when an analyst says — after an event — that they "knew it was going to happen" even if they didn't. It reflects two problems: bad or altered memory that embellishes their analytical powers, and the exaggerated belief that some things are "inevitable" and, therefore, easy to predict by straight-lining the judgment.
Example: An analyst — recalling (correctly or not) that he/she predicted the overthrow of a corrupt government — is confident that the current corrupt government is going to fall as well.

Conflict-of-interest bias, which causes an analyst to see issues through the unbalanced optic of personal, institutional, or national advantage.
Example: An analyst working for the foreign ministry thinks a negotiated settlement to a dispute is the only way it can be resolved.

False-consensus bias, which leads to assumptions that a widely held view is necessarily a more accurate one.
Example: An analyst gets 100 hits on Google with a particular interpretation of events, and he/she embraces the same view.

Obstacles in the Analyst's Organization — including its own biases, power dynamics, and inertia. In an article on this problem, CIA analyst and methodologist Jack Davis noted that even institutional review and coordination did not protect analysts from failure.[5] He listed the institutional obstacles:

Group think happens when a "cloistered and like-minded small group ... highly values consensus and [has] reinforced collective confidence in what can turn out to be a flawed set of assumptions and conclusions," according to Davis.

Boss think occurs when senior analysts and supervisors with long experience think that "they 'own' the paradigm through which inconclusive evidence is assessed." This "paradox of expertise," said Davis, can impose personal mindset on the group.

Tribal think is a similar phenomenon when peers with different specialties find new explanations of events to

[5] Jack Davis article (https://www.cia.gov/resources/csi/studies-in-intelligence/volume-60-no-3/why-bad-things-happen-to-good-analysts/)

be too disruptive and cannot accept them.

No think is the result of quintessential bureaucratic inertia — when "it can be difficult psychologically for analysts to revisit agreed-on language as long as the body of available information remains ambiguous, contradictory and otherwise inconclusive." (Davis was too elegant to say it, but he would lump plain laziness in with this "no think" obstacle. Rather than spend energy and risk confrontation, many analysts merely go with the flow — even if they don't agree with where the analysis is headed.)

The first big step you can take to avoid falling into these traps is to acknowledge them. The **second** is to strive to make yourself *conscious* of what influences your thoughts — in your own mind or in your institution — throughout your projects. The **third** is to find a methodology to serve as a roadmap, or as a checklist, that provides a strategy for quality control as you analyze and write.

- The drivers methodology presented in this manual is adaptable to many personalities and work requirements. You can change it as you wish and, at a minimum, integrate its good practices into your work and help keep you out of trouble.

SEVERAL MORE DEFINITIONS

Several other terms are important.

An Analytical Judgment is a statement that goes beyond available information. It is enriched by your expertise, assessment of sources, background, methodologies, and knowledge of policy. It validates the quality of information (even if implicitly), interprets it, puts it into context, and often pushes it into the future.

- What's happening (and where and how much)?
- Why and how is it happening?
- Who's making it happen?
- What'll happen next and later? With what level of probability?

An Opinion is something "you're entitled to," as some statesmen have pointed out (unlike your own facts), but it is probably of little interest or value to your reader.

- Opinions often are influenced by our values, wishes, biases, assumptions, and feelings — and less by hard facts.
- They usually lack transparency and rigor.

A Bias is a perspective that you bring to an issue, based on a combination of experiences, facts, values, and opinions that influence how you approach it.

- Biases can range from subtle to explicit — such as a sliding scale of nationalist beliefs about the superiority or inferiority of different political systems.
- They can also sneak into your analysis when you confuse moral judgments and analytical judgments. No matter how abhorrent you may find a government's policies to be, your moral rejection of it should not influence your judgments about its strengths, weaknesses, or prospects.
- Purging biases from your minds totally is difficult, if not impossible. Some are deeply baked in. But you can reduce their impact by being honest about them and taking steps to control them. You can even use them to formulate your first hypotheses — as long as you adjust them or abandon them when contradictory evidence emerges from your research. (Writing on computers allows you to save old drafts, so you can revisit abandoned thoughts again in the future.)

Assumptions are biases that are free of value baggage but can

nonetheless harm your analysis. They are unconscious "facts," often baselines, that you do not challenge — propositions whose truth you take for granted and that therefore can guide you in making a wrong judgment.

- Assumptions are not necessarily "bad" for your analysis as long as you examine them explicitly up front. The problem is when you *could have known* that assumptions are wrong. If analysts in 2019 had seen evidence, or even hints, that a pandemic like COVID-19 could emerge, their failure to consider it in their analysis would have been a major oversight.[6]
- They help you determine the scope of your work by ruling out certain extremely low-probability occurrences — and allowing you to focus on the main story. You usually don't need to include them explicitly in your final paper or briefing, but it's good to list them privately and consciously consider if they belong in your analysis.
- The flip side of assumptions are "wildcards" (about which we'll speak later). Wildcards are events of such low probability (or impossible) that we usually cannot make them part of analysis, or adding them would not make sense. Natural disasters, for example, are generally unpredictable even in countries in hurricane-prone regions or along earthquake fault lines. It's analytically "safe" to assume that a generally healthy leader in a generally stable country is not going to die by natural means or assassination during the one- or two-year period covered by your analysis.

A Hypothesis is a preliminary conclusion — sometimes even a "guesstimate" — based on your evidence and analysis that, similar to in a scientific project, you test as your work advances and alter as the facts warrant.

- When you're satisfied that the empirical evidence, logic, and other analytical tools support the hypothesis, you can call it your **key judgment**, your thesis, and it will become your Bottom Line Up Front (BLUF). It is an "extraordinary gift" — as TED Talks curator Chris Anderson calls the main idea his speakers give the program's audiences — that you give to your decisionmaker.[7]

[6] A U.S. National Intelligence Estimate about the "Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome" (SARS), a precursor to COVID-19, said in its lead key judgment: "The wave of Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) has been overcome, but SARS has not been eradicated. ... We remain vulnerable."

[7] "TED's Secret to Great Public Speaking," video by Chris Anderson, at https://www.ted.com/talks/chris_anderson_ted_s_secret_to_great_public_speaking

WHAT DO YOUR DECISIONMAKERS NEED?

What do decisionmakers need?

Understanding what your consumer needs is key to the relevance and usefulness of your analysis. Some issue experts, such as many academics, have the luxury of specializing in their subject areas without concern for the utility of their findings outside their cohort and institutions. There's nothing wrong with that — their contribution to their specialty is valuable — but that's not your mission as an analyst.

As a producer of *actionable* analysis, your objective is to help people make decisions. You'll give them only the information they need to trust you and your judgments — and to feel confident themselves that, if you're not by their sides, they can make sense of events and defend their interests.

To do that effectively, your first goal is to understand the policymakers' world — their responsibilities, authorities, and options.

An example:

You are an analyst following narcotics trafficking in a particular region, and your consumers are in charge of prioritizing that region's response to the threat the traffickers pose. Insofar as possible, you should think through the officials' perceptions of the problem:

What importance does the problem have for society?

What are the realistic options they have for dealing with it?

What has been tried before, and what were the results?

What resources are available in what timeframe?

What internal and external allies do they have?

What would success (or failure) look like?

What are the implications for each potential outcome?

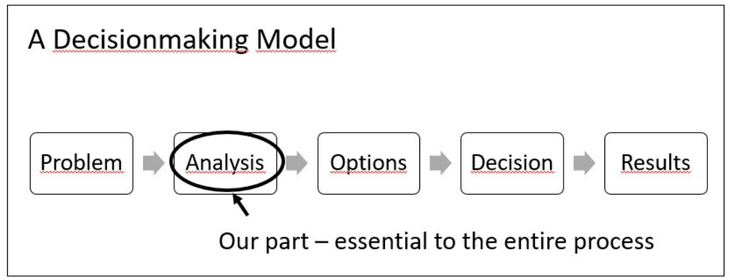
What are the implications for the individuals, their organizations, and the government?

Another example:

You are an analyst for a company that's suffering high absenteeism and attrition among workers, and senior management wants you to analyze what's going on — so they can remedy the situation. As you try to understand the problem, you put yourself in the managers' shoes:

> What's the impact of the absenteeism and attrition for the company?
>
> What is the constellation of realistic options, or parts of unrealistic options, that managers have in dealing with the problem?
>
> What solutions have been discussed and tried before, and with what results?
>
> What would success or failure look like, and how will either outcome affect them?

Your purpose in asking these questions isn't to fashion your analysis to answer the managers' operational questions. Rather,



you use them to understand their mindset and universe— so you can better help them think through the issue analytically and make their decisions. Your analysis is enhanced by your ability to know how policymakers swim in policy waters, but you can't get wet.

Your awareness of the decisionmakers' mindset will focus and enrich your analysis of the story. Knowing the results of past

efforts, or the reasons particular solutions were not attempted, will enable you to analyze that experience. You might even realize that the decisionmakers' goal is simply unrealistic, which could drive you to explore more deeply where they *can* have the impact they want. If the antinarcotics team failed after throwing a lot of money at some particular initiatives, perhaps you can discover other aspects of the problem in which they can do better. If cash bonuses did not increase employee loyalty, you might discover that other factors, such as the need for family-friendly measures, weigh much more on workers' calculations.

Your role, however, is not to play in the policy process. Even if you are a "policy analyst," whose job is ultimately to recommend action to your consumers, when you are doing your analysis of the problem, you must still keep your recommendations out of the mix.

- If you don't, a reader will almost always sense that you're steering your analysis toward your recommendation — that you're filtering, manipulating, or cooking the analysis to get the policy outcome that you want. That you're "cherry-picking" facts that serve your selfish purpose.

If you want your decisionmakers to trust you,
wear your analyst hat, not your chef hat,
when you write.
Don't let them think that you're cooking the analysis.

EXPLORATION

You can look into your own experiences to understand what policymakers need. Try this:

Think of a decision you made recently — and review how you made it. Was it a good process that led to a good decision? Would you recommend your process to someone who, perhaps, is asking for your advice?

Think ...

What's a decision you made recently?

related to work or studies?

related to a purchase?

related to boy/girlfriend or spouse?

related to housing situation?

How did you make the decision?

research? (if so, where?)

consult with friend or professional?

pray?

ask a fortuneteller?

toss a coin?

Moreover ... think ...

How did you control your impulses?

excessive optimism

assumptions, biases, prejudices

image and ego

Were you aware how you'd know if it was the right decision?

clear results

increase/decrease in benefits, profits

other indicators

How would you describe your analytical method?
How might you improve it?

DOES A DECISIONMAKER KNOW WHAT THEY NEED?

Experience shows that to make GOOD decisions in *any* context, you (and your decisionmakers) need a clear understanding of ...

- Your needs and desires — your "interests"
- The causes of your situation — the "drivers"
- How the drivers are evolving — the "trends"
- What's more (or less) likely to happen — "scenarios"
- The consequences of those scenarios — "implications"

That's all common sense, isn't it?

But decisionmakers — like almost all humans, no? — naturally seek information that gives them validation and power. People naturally want analysis that tells them that they, or their biases, are right. They naturally want an interpretation of events that they can use for their own purposes.

So when someone asks you for analysis, do they really want the truth?

Here's a fact: You sometimes will have the difficult task of giving your decisionmakers something other than what they want. It's tricky because, in most contexts, they're senior to you and have more influence in the organization than you.

- In the political world, they won an election as a sign that people welcome their leadership in *interpreting problems as well as proposing solutions*. In a bureaucracy or business, they rose up in the ranks (at least in principle) through good performance — while your value to the institution is normally significantly less widely acknowledged.

HOW CAN YOU CONTROL THE QUESTION?

But you can't tailor your analysis to the career interests of your decisionmakers. You have to find a middle ground — give them what they *want* within a product that gives them what they *need*.[8] You can do this several ways.

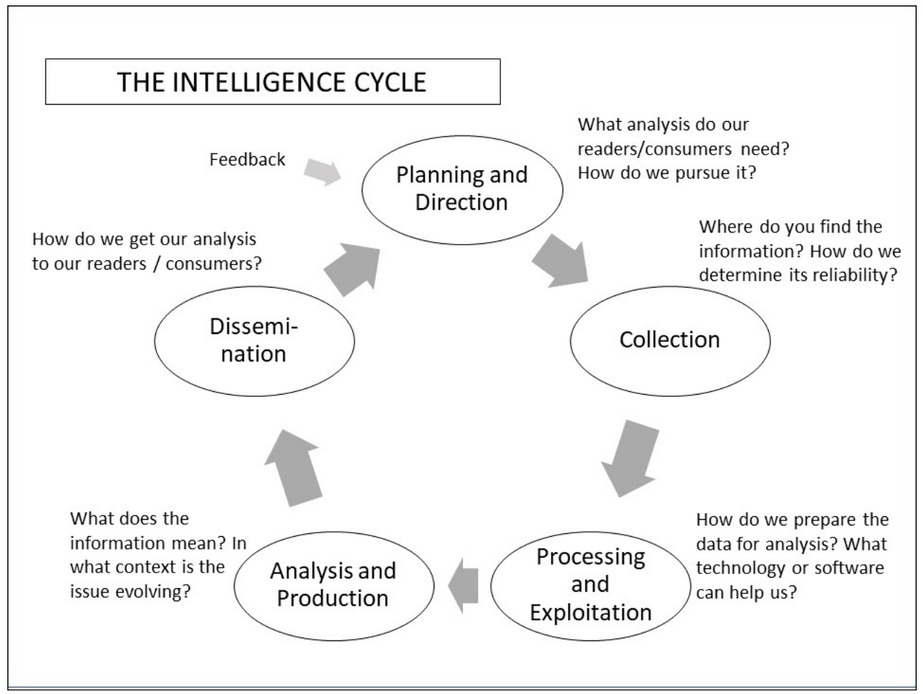
- Make sure the **"question" is analytical**. You will have greater control over the project if you keep the question open-ended, factual, and free of spin. If the decisionmaker asks you for an "assessment of the pervasive corruption" in a particular government or for "evidence that someone is engaged in nefarious activities in a neighboring country," you can rewrite the topic to be more neutral:
  "An assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of country X's anti-corruption efforts."
  "An assessment of leader X's policies toward its neighbors."
- Gain **control over the words**. Words can reveal prejudgment of an issue. If a policymaker asks for an "analysis of the terrorist camps" along a country's border — which prejudges that terrorists are there — you can push back and say "analysis of facilities" along a country's border, and then call them "terrorist" only if the evidence warrants. If you're asked to assess a foreign leader's "human rights violations," you can nudge the question back toward "human rights situation," and let the evidence take it toward violations if warranted.

If you don't control the question and the words, you can unintentionally run your analysis into a ditch.

- As the old adage goes, if you try to answer the wrong question, you'll find the wrong answer.
- In a parallel way, if you use the wrong search terms during the research phase of your project, you run a similar risk of getting a narrow, inaccurate sampling of the information.

The decisionmaker cannot object to your need to steer away from those traps.

[8] We will discuss politicization and related challenges later.



The intelligence cycle responds to the policymaker's needs and takes their feedback into account, but it is a process that collectors and analysts must control.

Analysis and Policy: One Team, Two Roles

In this manual, and in most working analysts' contexts, *analysis* refers to the process of understanding problems and opportunities. You're supposed to do it without regard to political factors, normative considerations, profit incentives, institutional preferences, and personal career interests.

The decisionmaking process tends to be influenced by those factors. This is not bad in and of itself; politics and profits and interests make the world go 'round. But they can introduce prejudices into analysis.

- Just as you may be suspicious of the diagnosis of a doctor or mechanic who happens to own a clinic offering expensive therapies or car dealership selling expensive cars, you're justified in being leery of politicians and bureaucrats who tend to see problems through the lens of solutions from which they benefit.

Nevertheless, good policymakers are often good analysts, and vice versa. The trick is that good ones keep the two processes apart in their minds and in time. They can look into each other's lane but not run in it. Policy analysts, after completing the *neutral* analysis, can change hats and go deeper into policy options, preferences, and outcomes confident that they didn't steer the analysis to support a desired policy.

- You need to know the decisionmaker's needs, but your effectiveness is enhanced by your independence from them.

The **intelligence cycle** shows how the analyst's universe functions in the service of, but separately from, the decisionmakers'. The process ...

- Keeps you and your consumers up to date on issues.
- Makes you revise and update the results of your analysis as circumstances evolve — and to be self-critical when you're wrong.
- Invests collection resources and analytical time and energy with greater efficiency.