

WHITE PAPER

Storytelling as Craft: Stories and Storytelling Skills for Mission Critical Teams

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**MISSION CRITICAL
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THE WHY OF STORYTELLING

“Stories are the single most powerful weapon in a leader’s arsenal”

Howard Gardner (Daft, 2014)

I aim to unfold why storytelling is useful, important, and effective for transmitting information, sharing the benefits of wisdom and experience, and training up better Mission Critical teams. I will then go on to explain simple techniques that will help you deliver more effective and powerful stories. There are many misperceptions of what storytelling is, which means that team leaders often use it less than they should as it is seen as a tangential or boring way of speaking. Storytelling is also a synonym for lying, so we have a prejudice against using stories in a teaching/training environment.

Why should we tell stories?

Human beings have been telling stories for 100,000 years, according to the evolutionary biologists (Haven, 2007). That is far longer than writing, far longer than drawing. This means that we have looked at the world through story for long enough that our brains have evolved to react to story; i.e. the brain is hard wired to receive information through story. Story allows information to embed into memory far deeper than a list of names, statistics, or numbers.

Stories activate a number of brain chemicals including oxytocin. Oxytocin helps generate empathy, i.e. it makes us, the listener, care. When we care we are invested in the outcome of the story, and when we care we are more likely to remember the story. By telling stories of the missions to your teams you are embedding the direct knowledge acquired from that incident into their brains in a way that the cadre can easily hold onto. If you are not using story to deliver information then you are working harder than you have to.

- *Personal Benefits:* Telling the story of the event allows us to make sense of what happened, understand the sequencing, understand our part in it and how it has affected us, understand what we did and how we did it. It also allows for reflection on what can be improved or avoided for next time.
- *Team Benefits:* hearing the stories of how the teams were formed helps cadre understand that they are part of something greater than themselves. The origin stories or mythologies of an organisation can help create a greater sense of belonging, loyalty and feelings of relevance.
- Listening to stories of missions that succeed or fail will help cadre to wrestle with the problems within each mission before they face them in reality. One MCTI participant said that he still remembered a story told to him by one of his teachers six years earlier. Six years of a single story working as a lesson is impressive.
- *Legacy benefits:* I believe that creating an environment where story is valued over silence will lead to increased team cohesion, more embedded learning, decreased mental health issues, and greater sustainability of teams.

What May Work Against You: *Strong Silent Modest Men*

You work in a mostly male environment, on a Mission Critical Team, and none of you like to talk about yourselves. These three factors mean you are either actively or subliminally encouraged not to speak about your work. In addition to this some of you are strictly prohibited from talking about certain aspects of your work; while necessary, this means it will be a little more difficult for those teams to talk about non prohibited missions, aspects of the work or events.

For the rest of the Mission Critical Teams where secrecy is not an issue it seems to me that you work in an environment where silence is the norm and is often modelled by your leaders.

However, a society of silence can contribute to isolation which can lead to poor mental health, not coping with stress and sometimes a suicidal mindset. A society of silence also impedes learning and processing about the event which will reduce your ability to teach about what does or does not work.

From the work I've done at MCTI and with the Limbless Veterans in the UK it is very clear to me that none of you like to talk about yourselves. It is seen as bragging, and you don't rate guys that have to talk about how great they did at their job. You work hard, you get the job done and you get on to the next thing. That is very admirable. However, telling the story of what happened is not the same as bragging about it, so the challenge for you is to find a way of talking about the work that you are comfortable with. The fact that you mention yourself as a main protagonist is not the same as talking about how great you are.

Storytelling can absolutely be a way of bragging, but it all comes down to how you do it and your intention. From what I have seen all of you are keen to improve the training for your teams so that they last longer in their line of work and create a positive legacy. Rather than seeing it as you bragging about yourself, I suggest that you change your mindset to think of it as giving your future teams a deeper learning experience that better prepares them for what is to come. If you can wrap your head around that fact, I think you will free yourself up to speak more clearly and coherently about the missions and the teams.

Stories and Lies

Over the last year of working with Mission Critical Teams I've heard quite a few guys refer to that one person on the team, or that one leader who uses stories.

Power

A big, tough samurai once went to see a little monk.

"Monk!"

He barked, in a voice accustomed to instant obedience.

"They tell me you know everything, even more than me. What is heaven and what is hell? Tell me now or I'll cut off your head"

The monk looked up at the mighty warrior and replied with utter disdain,

"Tell you about heaven and hell? I couldn't teach you about anything. You're an idiot, you're dirty. You're a disgrace, an embarrassment to the samurai class. Get out of my sight. I can't stand you."

The samurai got furious. He shook, red in the face, speechless with rage. He pulled out his sword, and prepared to slay the monk.

Looking straight into the samurai's eyes, the monk said softly,

"That's hell."

The samurai froze. He observed the rage like a red river raging through his body. He realized the compassion of the monk who had risked his life to show him hell.

He put down his sword and felt a wave of gratitude.

The monk said softly,
"And that's heaven."

“He’s just telling stories”. This is said in a way that implies that he is lying. “That’s just a myth” is another phrase I’ve heard. This association of storytelling with lying is another mindset that can block us from wanting to tell stories as part of our leadership style. Of course, it is not possible to be completely accurate when telling your version of events in regards to a mission or incident. The biases of perception mean that none of us can ever tell the whole truth, only what we understand from our perspective. However, that does not mean that a story is necessarily a lie. It is your best account of an event. Telling the story as best as you can remember it will help cadre handle their own missions better. By walking them through how you completed difficult, dangerous, intense or complex missions you equip them with greater knowledge than without hearing the story.

The Neuroscience of Narrative

Paul Zak, Founder of the Centre for NeuroEconomics, has done extensive research on the role of narrative in changing human behaviour. By mapping the listener’s brain and drawing blood during and after a participant listens to a story, he noted that the brain releases oxytocin and cortisol in large amounts. The oxytocin makes the listener invest in the story emotionally, and the cortisol increases our attention to the details of the story. The act of simply listening to a story was enough to make the participants donate their money towards a cause they had just heard about (Zak, 2015)

What Stories to tell?

When you first think about what stories to tell your mind will most likely go blank. You might think that you have no stories to tell, except that one funny one you roll out after the beers have been had. Often the easiest way to think of what stories to tell is to start with what gets told late at night when it’s just the team around.

Stories don’t have to be strictly about the success or failure or your team. The scope is very wide. The stories you are telling will serve two purposes; they will make you a better teacher and leader, and they will also allow you to better process what has happened to you.

Stories could include your initiation onto your team (Hell Week), your first mission, how you dealt with the death of a friend, life at home, a mentor who helped you, missions that go wrong, missions that go right, what you do when you’re not at work, other teams/people/incidents that inspired you to think differently.

I will include some phrases and questions that might help you think of some stories. These can be stories that happened to you, or were told to you. I recommend keeping a little notebook and writing down even just one word that will help trigger the story from your memory.

Burdens

Hogen, a Chinese Zen teacher, lived alone in a small temple in the country. One day four traveling monks appeared and asked if they might make a fire in his yard to warm themselves.

While they were building the fire, Hogen heard them arguing about subjectivity and objectivity. He joined them and said: “There is a big stone. Do you consider it to be inside or outside your mind?”

One of the monks replied: “From the Buddhist viewpoint everything is an objectification of mind, so I would say that the stone is inside my mind.”

“Your head must feel very heavy,” observed Hogen, “if you are carrying around a stone like that in your mind.”

- What Made You Join Your Team?
- What do you wish you had known on day One?
- One Story That No One Would Believe About Your Work
- A Lesson in Discipline
- When Team Becomes Family
- Getting Out of a Tough Situation
- When Did You Fail at Something?
- How Belief Can Change Things
- Unlikely Allies
- The Longest Day
- A Light in The Darkness
- A Moment When you Broke the Rules
- The Moment When I Started Trusting my Team
- Anti-climactic Missions
- Mission Failures – How we Got Better
- The Best/Worst Person You've Ever Worked With and Why
- Where Stupidity Gets You
- Late Night Phone Calls
- Your Most Useful Piece of Kit and Why

Don't avoid telling the difficult stories, don't shy away from the funny ones. Stories do not have to be serious or traumatic to have a lesson in them. Nor do they have to always be funny to make an impact. Great leaders have many different stories at their disposal which can be used in many different teaching situations.

Basic Truths About Stories

Great Stories Trigger Empathy. Great stories trigger oxytocin which is how empathy is created. The more we care the more we remember, the more the knowledge inside the story becomes rooted in memory. If we care it is usually because our speaker cares and they transmit that directly to us.

Great Stories Have a Clear Narrative Line. Did you find it easy to follow the story? Having a clear narrative line without too many tangents, side comments, and unnecessary information helps the audience feel like they are in safe hands, and helps them pay more attention.

Adversity

While he sat one afternoon in the Fredericksburg Garden in Copenhagen smoking his cigar as was his habit, and turning over a great many things in his mind, he suddenly reflected that he had as yet made no career for himself. Whereas, everywhere around him he saw the men of his age becoming celebrated, establishing themselves as renowned benefactors because all of their efforts were directed at making life easier for the rest of mankind, whether materially by constructing steamboats, railroads or telegraph lines, or intellectually by publishing easy compendiums to universal knowledge, or most – audacious of all spiritually by showing how thought itself could make spiritual existence systematically easier and easier. Kierkegaard's cigar burned down, he lighted another, the train of reflection held him. It occurred to him then that since everyone was engaged everywhere in making things easy. Perhaps someone might be needed to make things hard again; that life might become so easy that people would want the difficult back again; and that this might be a career and destiny for him.

Kierkegaard - Irrational man – a study in existential philosophy

Great Stories Often Have a Powerful/Clear/Single Opening and closing Line. A great opening and closing line can increase the impact of your story. It will take time to find them, but when you do, remember them. Knowing when to stop and let the story sink in is a real skill. Often, due to nerves or lack of confidence, we will keep talking to “make sure” they got it, this creates a double or triple ending. Trust your audience, stop when the story is done.

Great Speakers Have a Powerful Delivery. In addition to content, how we deliver our stories makes a difference. Delivery includes eye contact, volume, speed, pace, use of pause, vocal variations, emotional intensity and investment. Basic rule: Variety in all things from speed to tone to pace to rhythm.

Great Stories Have Memorable Imagery/Moments. Using the five senses to create strong imagery makes the story more impactful. Strong imagery and powerfully described moments make a story stand out and help root it into memory. Basic Rule: place yourself in the scene before you speak, if you see it we will see it. If you want your cadre to understand the intensity of a situation, then tell them about it.

The Moral is Not Always Clear: Many of you have asked about providing a moral or a learned lesson at the end of your story. As a teacher you are absolutely welcome to do this to guide your teams towards the wisdom you are trying to share. In addition to this it is worth keeping in mind that your listeners will also learn other lessons from your story that you may not be aware of.

Basic Categories of Stories

There are many categories of stories. I created this category list with Mission Critical Teams in mind. You may find more categories beyond these. Having a variety of stories will make you a more effective teacher.

INSPIRATIONAL: stories about events or people that contain unusual successes, overcoming the odds, facing adversity. *Don't ever try to be inspirational.* Just note what inspires you. Stories that inspire you will inspire your team.

Peace

A senior monk and a junior monk were traveling together. At one point, they came to a river with a strong current. As the monks were preparing to cross the river, they saw a very young and beautiful woman also attempting to cross. The young woman asked if they could help her cross to the other side.

The two monks glanced at one another because they had taken vows not to touch a woman.

Then, without a word, the older monk picked up the woman, carried her across the river, placed her gently on the other side, and carried on his journey.

The younger monk couldn't believe what had just happened. After rejoining his companion, he was speechless, and an hour passed without a word between them.

Two more hours passed, then three, finally the younger monk could contain himself any longer, and blurted out “As monks, we are not permitted a woman, how could you then carry that woman on your shoulders?”

The older monk looked at him and replied, “Brother, I set her down on the other side of the river, why are you still carrying her?”

TEACHING: stories where a success or failure has happened and you have gained an insight from it. You can be the student in the situation, or it can be about someone else.

CAUTIONARY: stories where something goes very badly wrong. You identify what that is and use it to land your message. Although in Mission Critical Teams we sometimes avoid talking about failures, they are a really essential part of the development of new teams.

“I” STORIES / PERSONAL ACHIEVEMENT: these stories are about things that you have done within or outside of the Mission Critical work. You can talk about your successes without bragging. These stories can transmit feelings such as courage, resilience, aspiration, willpower, ambition. They can help outline paths for people who want to do similar things.

PARABLES: stories from a fictional world that contain ideas or situations that exemplify what you are trying to say. Parables can take a while to sink in, and it’s important to use the right one for the right situation. Some examples of parables are included in the side bars of this document.

EXTREME ACTION: stories where you or your team or your main character have gone through an intense event. Transmits knowledge, resilience, builds team cohesion. Be aware that the first few times you tell stories of a traumatic event that has happened to you are still processing it emotionally. It gets easier the longer you tell it. These can be some very valuable stories with a huge amount of knowledge in them. One of the Limbless Veterans, ex Army guy who lost both legs, said “Every time I tell my story I release something from inside of me that was killing me”.

HUMOUR: A story can be funny because of how you tell it, or because what happened was funny. Using humour to diffuse tension is a common tactic, and it is very effective for knowledge transfer.

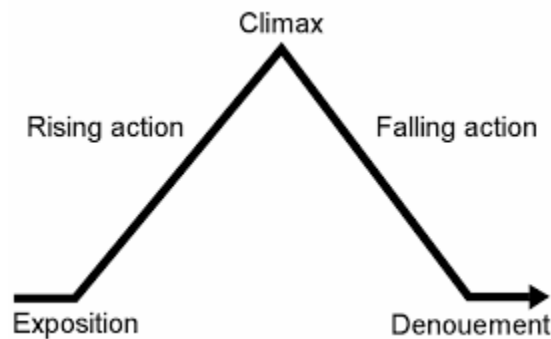
ORIGIN STORIES: can be stories of how the team came to be, how the unit was formed, the history of the organisation and so on. Origin tales create sense of belonging, inheritance, ancestry and community. They are a fantastic way to create group cohesion, unity and a mutual purpose. Knowing where you come from gives a group strength.

Fear

During the civil wars in feudal Japan, an invading army would quickly sweep into a town and take control. In one particular village, everyone fled just before the army arrived - everyone except the Zen master. Curious about this old fellow, the general went to the temple to see for himself what kind of man this master was. When he wasn't treated with the deference and submissiveness to which he was accustomed, the general burst into anger. "You fool," he shouted as he reached for his sword, "don't you realize you are standing before a man who could run you through without blinking an eye!" But despite the threat, the master seemed unmoved. "And do you realize," the master replied calmly, "that you are standing before a man who can be run through without blinking an eye?"

WARRIOR/UNUSUAL FEATS: the world you operate in is exceptional. Stories of this exceptionalness recognise the effort involved with being on the team. It also allows cadre to understand better what is to come, and who their teachers are.

Shaping your personal stories



True life stories are not like traditional fairy/folktales which have a tendency to follow the pyramid shape listed above. In true life stories there are no clear endings or clear beginnings. So it is up to you to impose a structure on your story. The structure above is taken from a German novelist in the 1800s, Gustav Freytag (Freytag, 1896). He had developed his idea from Aristotle's Poetics.

Exposition/Introduction: *The exposition/introduction presents the setting, characters, back stories, basic conflict; it also establishes the mood or atmosphere of the story.*

Rising Action: Rising action is where the basic conflict is brewing, introduction of obstacles.

Climax: The climax is the turning point and this effects a change either for the better or for the worse in the protagonist's situation.

Falling action: Conflict is beginning to resolve. Often unexpected strengths are found, or unavoidable weaknesses are uncovered. The protagonist either wins or loses to the antagonist/problem.

Denouement/conclusion: Goals are achieved or not. The conclusion makes way for the catharsis - an event or events allowing the tension or anxiety to loosen. Characters return to their lives often changed by the events that have taken place.

Beginners Mind

Nan-in, a Japanese master during the Meiji era (1868-1912), received a university professor who came to inquire about Zen.

Nan-in served tea. He poured his visitor's cup full, and then kept on pouring.

The professor watched the overflow until he no longer could restrain himself. "It is overfull. No more will go in!"

"Like this cup," Nan-in said, "you are full of your own opinions and speculations. How can I show you Zen unless you first empty your cup?"

Now that you are paying more attention to stories you may find yourself observing the people who tell them in your work and life. I highly recommend this. Pay attention to the great and terrible storytellers that you know. Learn from the best and the worst speakers.

To become a better speaker myself I was determined to learn from everyone. If I could figure out what they were doing that made me engage I would fold it into my practice. If I could determine what they were doing that was making me switch off I would avoid doing that.

The How of Storytelling: Let's Get Technical

How you tell a story can be as important as what you choose to tell.

In a nutshell:

- Know where the story begins and where it ends.
- Watch your voice: keep it clear, audible, resonant.
- Don't waffle, go on a tangent, or go off track. Avoid delivering unnecessary information, if it's not relevant to this story don't include it.
- Eye Contact: look at your audience. Vary your eye contact. Eye contact helps land the story.
- Don't deliver a series of facts, give us context, environment, details. A story is not the same as a mission report.
- Avoid monotone and mono-everything (mono rhythm, mono speed, mono volume, mono emotional range)- by creating variety you increase the dynamism in the story.
- If you feel it we feel it, if you see it we see it.
- Body language can help your audience see your story more clearly i.e. don't be afraid to gesture.
- Become aware of your verbal and physical tics. Standard verbal tics: um, ah, eh, you know, actually, and then. These are used as filler to avoid silence. Better to breathe instead of using a filler. Silence allows your audience to catch up to you.
- When in doubt, take a breath. Your audience are always 2-7 seconds behind you, you have more time than you are taking.
- Watch your speed. We often hurry through a story because we worry people are not interested. By speeding up we decrease the impact of the story.

Experience

For he had learned some of the things that everyman must find out for himself, and he had found out about them as one has to find out, through errors and through trial, through fantasy and delusion, through falsehoods and his own damn foolishness, through being mistaken and wrong and an idiot and egotistical and aspiring and hopeful and believing and confused.

As he lay there he had gone back over his life, and bit by bit, he had extracted from it some hard lessons of experience. Each thing he learned was so simple and so obvious once he grasped it, that he wondered why he had not always known it. Altogether they wove into a kind of leading thread, trailing backward through his past and out into the future. And he thought now perhaps he could begin to shape his life to mastery, for he felt a sense of new direction deep within him, but whither it would take him he could not say.

Thomas Wolfe – You can't go home again

How to Begin a Story

Beginnings are important. A clear beginning creates easy audience buy in.

Some good openers to stories (I am fabricating the content because I have never worked on a Mission Critical Team):

e.g It was a boiling hot afternoon in the Helmund Province when we got the call to send the Chinook helicopters to retrieve a team that was under attack. (Establishes setting, context and problem in opening line)

Or

The fire at Chelsea stadium was the largest fire I had ever seen in my career as a firefighter up to that point. (establishes location, setting, problem and character history)

Or

You never forget the first time you do open heart surgery solo. For me I was 22 years old at a temporary field hospital in Yemen. (Establishes setting, character, and sense of tension, as well as invitation to audience with the opening few words)

Here are those same openers with less focus and more waffle:

e.g. I, we, so the team, we went to Afghanistan, it was like 11 months in maybe? No I think we were there about 10 months when it happened. I was asleep when Ben woke me up. It was 0300 hours and there was a lot of noise when, no wait, it wasn't that early.

Our fire department nearly shut down a few years ago. It was mostly cause of the mayor, but that's another story. But that's not really the point, I wanted to talk about Chelsea, cause obviously that's the big story of the last year or so, so let me tell you how it happened, you won't believe it. So it was a Wednesday and...

or

Obviously, I've cracked a lot of chests in my time. Children are really difficult to operate on, especially when they aren't sedated. It's hard to get anaesthesiologists out in the middle of Yemen. That's where I was, when I first operated on a kid. It was Yemen. But I was so sure it would be fine, which it was. So it was the middle of the afternoon and...

Patience

A martial arts student went to his teacher and said earnestly, "I am devoted to studying your martial system. How long will it take me to master it."

The teacher's reply was casual, "Ten years." Impatiently, the student answered, "But I want to master it faster than that. I will work very hard. I will practice everyday, ten or more hours a day if I have to. How long will it take then?"

The teacher thought for a moment, "20 years."

How to tell the Middle of Your Story

Avoid tangents, waffle and unnecessary information. Tangents steal focus, and distract the audience. If you do it too many times they will stop listening.

e.g. *We were en-route to the site accompanied by another Chinook. Davey was flying that one. He was so crazy. He went a whole month on cheese and beer alone. You wouldn't want to be standing behind him in the bar. This other time in Arizona he drove out into the desert, off road over the lip of a canyon to see who would be in worse shape, him or the motorcycle. But anyway he is a great guy. So he was flying the other Chinook and we got to the site.*

Don't overplay for laughs. If you are naturally funny, that is a really useful storytelling skill. However, don't make everything a joke or you lose the tension of your story. As with everything in storytelling doing too much of one thing makes your audience lose interest.

Don't avoid telling the challenging parts. Your insight into the difficulties posed and how you and your team handled or didn't handle them can contain vital information for your cadre.

Talking about how you overcame adversity helps your listener to learn directly from you. You are not bragging. Your experience can directly benefit your students by allowing them the mental challenge of thinking through your difficult situation and asking themselves how they would handle it.

Don't over embellish, don't get so carried away with the action that you don't talk about the set up, the aftermath, and the impact on you and your team.

Also remember this: you've been telling stories your entire life. So you have a lot of experience under your belt.

Perspective

A man approaches a village, seeing a woman gardening he stops.

"Do you live here? What kind of village is this? What are the people like?"

"What are the people like where you are from?" she replied.

"They are mean spirited, back stabbing and malicious" he said, his face a sneer.

"That is exactly what you'll find up ahead".

"Thank you for warning me" he said and walked away in the other direction.

A little while later another man came along and asked the same question. When asked about his people he replied "Where I'm from everyone is considerate, kind and compassionate".

The woman smiled and nodded. "That is exactly what you will find up ahead".

How to End a Story:

Endings are never easy; in life or in the world of stories. Here are some ways in which we tend to end stories.

Double or Triple Endings

One thing to watch out for is “the double or triple ending”.

e.g. *So we rescued the team from Helmund. It was the toughest rescue I've ever been through. The team, they sustained a lot of injuries. Some of them never fought again. But I saw some of them the following year. They seemed ok. We didn't talk about it though. Two guys went back out.*

This is a story that keeps trying to end but never quite gets there.

Tapering off

e.g. *We got awarded by the city for our work at Chelsea stadium. That was good, though we lost the badges later, I think they are at the station somewhere maybe...*

Apologising

e.g. *So that's it, that's what happened. I didn't tell it very well but you get the idea.*

You may not yet know how to end your story. I'd be surprised if you did. First tell it, and see where it ends. Notice if you are tapering off, or adding extra sentences, or apologising. Try to find a conclusion in your last sentence.

Some Example of Clear Conclusive Endings

That rescue was one of the hardest to date, and has stayed with me.

It was the last time I flew a Chinook.

We expected nothing more than to do our jobs at Chelsea stadium, but what has come of it is a stronger community with better firefighters signing up every year.

Once you find your ending, know that that is your end point. **Resist the urge to keep talking or fill space.** Great endings leave a lasting impact.

Friends

A man is walking down the street when he falls in a hole. The walls are so steep he can't get out.

"A doctor passes by and the guy shouts up, 'Hey you. Can you help me out?' The doctor writes a prescription, throws it down in the hole and moves on.

"Then a priest comes along and the guy shouts up, 'Father, I'm down in this hole can you help me out?' The priest writes out a prayer, throws it down in the hole and moves on

"Then a friend walks by, 'Hey, Joe, it's me can you help me out?' And the friend jumps in the hole. Our guy says, 'Are you stupid? Now we're both down here.' The friend says, 'Yeah, but I've been down here before and I know the way out.'"

Closing Thoughts

There is no right way to tell a story. There are as many styles as there are people. I would encourage you to find and develop your style. The more you tell stories when leading teams the easier it will get. Storytelling has been used in all kinds of areas in the world in extreme situations such as post genocide areas to rebuild community, it has been used with the Limbless Veterans for transmitting stories of resilience, and in war zones like Northern Ireland to build bridges across political divides. Stories are where we find our common ground and where we learn easily and quickly.

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About the Author

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About MCTI

The Mission Critical Team Institute was founded in 2018 as an applied research and education institute in partnership with select Mission Critical Teams within Military Special Operations (5 eyes), Tactical Law Enforcement, Urban and Wilderness Fire, Emergency and Trauma Medicine, and NASA. As MCT's are reactive by design the only true strategic asset they possess are their personnel. With the increased need for adaptive teams within emerging liquid networks, our focus is on supporting MCT Instructor Cadres overcome the gap between the theoretical and the applied to improve all aspects of the operator lifecycle. Through a robust collaborative inquiry community made up of the most elite teams in the world our intent is not to solve their problems, but to support their people to solve their own problems in a sustainable manner.

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