

Overcoming pathologies in military organizations

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For more than 30 years, CNA has conducted analyses to support military organizations through change and challenges. These numerous organizational analyses have aimed to design or redesign structures and processes to accommodate changes in mission, geopolitical circumstances, legislative requirements, and other variables. In performing over 40 of these analyses, we have identified several military organizational “pathologies”—common design choices or evolutions that result in corresponding “ills” (such as inefficiency, dysfunction, or even dissolution).¹

We have identified and named four types of pathologies related to organizational structure or alignment of roles and responsibilities that we have found to be particularly prevalent: multi-hatting, patchwork structures, homeopathy, and overflow. Although some aspects of these pathologies have documented parallels in nonmilitary domains, these four are particularly salient to the defense organizations we support. It is notable that structure and roles are not the only elements of significance in effective organizational design—the underlying processes, skill sets, and culture of an organization also matter.

As the saying goes in medicine, an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure—and so, our aim is to illuminate military organizational pathologies in order to empower decision-makers to prevent them from developing in their own organizations. Below we describe each pathology and the implications we have seen.

¹ We have found discussions of *pathology* as it relates to organizations as far back as the 1984 *Strategic Management Journal* article by Manfred F. R. Kets de Vries and Danny Miller, “Neurotic Style and Organizational Pathology,” though the application of the term varies by author.

Multi-hatting

Multi-hatting is one of the most common pathologies in the design of military organizations. It is the assignment of multiple “hats,” or roles, to a single commander, staff, or organization. The fundamental driver of multi-hatting is the need to balance numerous oversight and command-and-control requirements against resource constraints. That is, commanders, staffs, or organizations are frequently multi-hatted in an effort to achieve efficiencies or meet new oversight requirements with existing officers and staffs. Although the intent is laudable, multi-hatting can result in a number of challenging implications for organizations.

- **Overwhelming workload.** More hats mean more responsibilities, which can sometimes be too much for a single person or organization to reasonably execute. In studies we did for the Coast Guard and the Joint Staff, for example, a single officer was responsible for both the full-time job of financial management and other responsibilities—some of which warranted full-time attention themselves. We have found that this situation can result in work done at lower quality, work not done at all, or staff burn-out. In other examples, multi-hatting has led to a requirement for personnel with a combination of expertise and backgrounds in fields that are not completely overlapping. The need to maintain, or develop, expertise in two separate domains can be an overwhelmingly large task. For instance, one organization required an officer to be responsible for both space operations and missile defense. Those mission areas have some overlapping knowledge areas, but on the whole require different skills sets and experience bases.
- **Disproportionate or competing priorities.** At best, a multi-hatted commander or organization executing two or more sets of responsibilities will not devote the same amount of attention to each. All of our studies that attempted to quantify the amount of effort spent on responsibilities found the effort was unevenly distributed in multi-hatting situations, leading to problems in executing all jobs effectively. At worst, the combination of hats on a particular head can lead to conflicts of interest. These have included, for instance, being responsible for both financial management and procurement, for concept development and experimentation to test the concepts, and for simultaneous rear and forward activities.

Patchwork structures

Patchwork structures result from amalgamations of existing organizations. There are two varieties of patchwork structures. In the first variety, new organizations are established by combining, or are placed on top of, existing organizational elements. The other variety is the piecemeal modification of an organization over time to account for changes in scope or responsibilities. Comprehensive organizational change is time-consuming, challenging, and

disruptive. Rather than engage in wholesale change, leaders sometimes choose to jury-rig a structure with the fewest alterations possible to implement the necessary change. For instance, a CNA study of the Office of the Secretary of Defense (OSD), driven by the Goldwater-Nichols Department of Defense (DOD) Reorganization Act of 1986, found at that time, “organizational elements of DOD, and of OSD in particular, do not reflect any master plan nor are they necessarily arranged into logical organizational groupings.”

Patchwork structures have challenging implications:

- **Inefficient processes.** Organizations that are not purpose-built can yield inefficient processes. For instance, a combatant command proposed a subordinate command organization that was based on the structure of its predecessor, even though its mission set was different. We found in a wargame stress test, however, that the proposed structure forced more cross-coordination than was necessary—leading to inefficient staff work. Similarly, when one joint command was disestablished, some of its internal organizations were absorbed wholesale into another staff’s structure. This led to unnecessary management layers and poorly codified responsibilities, which both slowed down processes.
- **Problematic oversight.** In several instances, a military service has placed a new parent command on top of existing subordinate organizations. The new oversight mechanism can result in tensions as subordinates lose autonomy. Alternatively, if the newer, parent organization does not have the capacity to exert control or has poorly defined lines of authority, it may default to acting merely as a pass-through, providing little additional direction or control. We saw this when a Marine Corps command gained responsibility for several existing training organizations, with little concomitant increase in staff.

Homeopathy

In human health, homeopathy supports the notion that things that produce similar symptoms must naturally have some sort of complementary relationship. We see a similar logic play out regularly in organizational designs and redesigns. Those leading the design or reorganization tend to group things that seem similar on the surface into the same organizational structures. Often, this is appropriate. For instance, grouping all budget or financial management staff within a single unit makes sense when they use the same skills, tools, and data, and would benefit from regularly sharing lessons and resources. However, in other instances, this natural tendency can create organizational challenges:

- **Inefficient processes.** Sometimes, the structural groupings produced by organizational homeopathy can create process inefficiencies. For instance, in a study for a Marine Corps command, we found that IT in garrison was being managed as a garrison asset (because it

was used in garrison), while IT for operating forces was being managed as an operating forces asset (because it was being used by the operating forces). However, the artificial distinction in types of IT led to similar functions being conducted in multiple locations—IT management required the same activities, regardless of the IT customer. In another example, we identified numerous directorates in a Navy secretariat office performing the same tasks because all responsibilities had been organized by “customer,” despite the fact that identical tasks were performed for each customer.

- **Misaligned authorities or capabilities.** Placing responsibilities within a particular organization simply because it seems like a good fit can also hamstring the organization to execute these responsibilities. For instance, in exploring the appropriate home for a new organization, we found that the “obvious” headquarters had problematic legal constraints, while an analysis of the needs of the organization suggested a less intuitive headquarters as a better fit.

Overflow

Over time, military organizations may take on new responsibilities, either by informal mission creep or by assignment as new needs arise without an obvious organizational home. In every organizational study we can recall, the documented responsibilities failed to capture the breadth of activities performed by the organization. In many cases, we have found that these particular responsibility additions do not come with corresponding codification, deconfliction, or increased resources, leading to organizational “overflow.” The tendency is to continually add more responsibilities, without reviewing and removing old or unnecessary ones.² We have found this pathology in organizations as varied as the Marine Corps support establishment, Navy operational, and joint headquarters commands. Most notably, organizational overflow happens incrementally or below the level of institutional attention, which can result in unanticipated, overwhelming staff workload.

Organizations doing more than they are sized for will quickly become overwhelmed—unless deliberate effort is made to review priorities, scope down efforts on less important tasks, or remove unnecessary tasks all together. We found this to be the case, for example, in a Navy headquarters directorate, which had taken on so many miscellaneous tasks that its modest staff was struggling to accommodate mandated staff reductions.

² In fact, there is a corollary in the consumer goods industry, called the Kano model, in which novel features eventually become “must haves,” only to be replaced by new novel features. A good example of this is automatic windows in cars.

Creating healthy military organizations

With disease, multiple pathologies can have the same contributing factors, and the same resulting symptoms. This is true across the organizational pathologies we address here as well. Specifically, we find that these pathologies are the result of three drivers: accommodating new responsibilities, finding efficiencies, and standing up new organizations. Similarly, the set of resulting symptoms is reasonably small, but consequential. We synthesize the drivers, pathologies, and symptoms in the table below.

Driver	Pathologies	Symptoms
New responsibilities	Multi-hatting Patchwork structures Overflow	Overwhelming workload Competing priorities Problematic oversight Inefficient processes
Find efficiencies	Multi-hatting Homeopathy	Overwhelming workload Competing priorities Inefficient processes Misaligned authorities/capabilities
Stand up new organization	Patchwork structures Homeopathy	Inefficient processes Challenging oversight Misaligned authorities/capabilities

To avoid the organizational pathologies we describe, our experience suggests that designers or leaders should address two requirements:

- Ensure top-down design choices are complemented with bottom-up data. Purpose-building organizations requires a deep understanding of who staff interact with, what personnel and information are required for each process, and what are the most important organizational tasks. Designing with these in mind can protect against structure and role alignment choices that produce the symptoms outlined above.
- Support organizational development with change management practices. Realigning boxes in a chart alone will rarely address the drivers identified in the table. In fact, these changes can be undermined by conflicting or immutable processes or culture. For this reason, any organizational design or redesign must be supported by deliberate efforts to gain buy-in, establish supporting processes, and enforce a culture that aligns with the needs driving the change.

All of these pathologies can be mitigated with deliberate design and supported implementation. Deliberate design includes considering the goals of the design or redesign, the organization's existing dynamics, design constraints and restraints, and the larger ecosystem

within which the organization must exist. Supported implementation involves acknowledging the role of culture, staff, and processes—and involving all of them in the change. Both deliberate design and supported implementation require time and resources, but they have a proven record in the prevention and treatment of the pathologies that stand in the way of a healthy organizational transformation.