

SENIOR FELLOWS AND FRIENDS

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UNDISCIPLINED BY DESIGN:

**Recap of 12/14/22 session with Col. Jason "TOGA" Trew
Commandant and Dean, School of Advanced Air & Space Studies
Maxwell Air Force Base**

Dear Senior Fellows and Friends,

In mid-December, we were exposed to the incisive thinking of U.S. Air Force fighter pilot and military leader TOGA Trew [[bio](#)] about the contribution play and design thinking can make to innovation and strategy. It was a privilege to hear his point of view, his stories (at least one of which was very funny), and the contributions of participants. For the first time, all of the latter were accomplished Excellence in Government senior fellows.

TOGA told us about his transition from fighter pilot to educator in the Air Force. First, he studied. The rigorous (and readable) basis of his thinking is documented in his Ph.D. dissertation, which examines how Air Force organizational culture is shaped by the myth of Icarus and Daedalus. It's available as a book ([The Icarus Solution: The Lure and Logic of Air-mindedness](#)) with fabulous endnotes that's [available for free here](#).

What does “design” mean?

One of the things he had to do, when it was time to dig into the curriculum at the squadron officer school, was to grasp what was meant by “design” in the context of that environment, because the word was showing up in about a third of the courses. He accepted the challenge to adapt Stanford d.school and IDEO design processes, which have been embraced by the corporate world, saying, “Let’s take Stanford’s model (empathize, define, ideate, prototype, test) and try to adapt it to something useful to us. What if we teach people who aren't designers how to do those things, and they can apply it to all sorts of business problems, not just the creation of a digital interface and not just the creation of a product or a service?”

The idea was not to turn everyone into designers, but to instill a sense of designfulness – like using athletics to instill sportsmanship. In the process of trying to adapt that model to Air Force culture, TOGA encountered two very interesting resources, a loose collection of Defense professionals who are applying design thinking to wicked problems and the Lego Serious Play open source facilitation method.

In what sense is TOGA using “play”?

If you search on “Metis” in TOGA’s book, you will find the paragraph that contains the bullets below. They link the concepts that were discussed in our session and show what play brings to the design of strategy. In Greek mythology, Metis was a Titan who was the personification of wisdom, the first spouse of Zeus, and the mother of Athena. In that sense, play:

- Is a combination of objective logic and subjective inspiration stemming from both rigorous experimentation and serendipity;
- Embraces creative tensions;
- Bears on fluid situations which are constantly changing and which at every moment combine contrary features and forces that are opposed to each other;
- Knows that all perspectives are partial, both biased and incomplete.

I.e., there is nothing superficial or trivial about play.

Conditioning our strategic sense

As TOGA pointed out, “design” and “play” mean different things to different people. His reply to me during a LinkedIn discussion that occurred days after this session, in which I described my late father’s focused construction of his next few moves whether in sports or board games, clarified one point. TOGA commented,

"Maybe play is, first and foremost, the mental moves that help us realize advantages amidst complexity and competition. This idea of 'developing and rehearsing' -- or what I'd call 'conditioning our strategic sense' -- is key, I think."

Iterating through the design process

LEGO Serious Play, a flexible facilitation method that teaches a designful approach that's agile, is useful for teaching the circular, iterative design process. It's not enough to have a model, apply it to strategy, and be done with it because the facts on the ground are often changing rapidly and the strategy must adapt, sometimes in real time. It's necessary for the team to practice going through the steps, all the while cultivating empathy for each other and getting into condition so that, when something happens, they're prepared and warmed up. Empathy is "almost like a background that everything happens in because you're always trying to think with and through other individuals because we're not gonna do any of this by ourselves." TOGA described a recurring scenario that illustrated this point while he was serving as battle director at the air operations center in Doha. It was possible to cycle through a wide range of potential alternatives rapidly from a warm start.

Turning friction into traction

Of this, TOGA says, "Simply put, there is a strategic advantage when 'all of us' are present. That is, when the right people are gathered together and when they bring all of themselves; when they each show up as their full freaky self. Doing so multiplies the perspectives available to the team. Holding those dissimilar views in creative tension — instead of allowing any one view to dominant the group — enables us to turn friction into traction." (Excerpted from the last resource, below.) This paragraph aligns with two Senior Fellows and Friends objectives, which have been to create conversational and now project space where participants might decide to show up as their full freaky selves – and some have.

Points brought up by participants

Becoming a world-class anticipator

Our former Coast Guard innovator, who now teaches leadership at the SEC, shared that the Coast Guard realized in the 1990's that they were moving into an environment where surprises could no longer be effectively managed by reacting and adapting. It was no longer sufficient for the Coast Guard to be a world-class responder; it needed to become a world-class anticipator as well. This triggered the development of the Coast Guard's Evergreen Process, where every four years the organization imagines five future worlds and what those might look like. In 2005, one of the five worlds was called Code Quebec – the maritime flag for quarantine – and they talked about a future pandemic. Geoff Abbott wrote about this for ACT-IAC recently; you may [read his column here](#).

Who gets to be an innovator?

Our former GSA HR practitioner, who's doing a PhD on increasing innovation in government, initiated discussion about "who gets to be an innovator." Participants agreed across the board that this was an issue, and contributed agency-specific examples to the effect that far too few civilian government employees are included in innovation efforts at any but the most basic levels. TOGA's suggestion about how to do it differently by creating "pull" and opening up participation to whoever feels drawn to it was well received. One of the organizations that does this well is Chick-Fil-A, which involves employees in a large innovation center, delightfully named Hatch, that was established in Atlanta in 2013.

Appropriations, Budget and Procurement help keep things stuck

Senior IT and Budget people described past and current situations in which these processes have hamstrung agency attempts to innovate. We also heard some stealth knowledge transfer about how the Coast Guard Innovation Council made it work.

Items TOGA shared from his body of work

[Designfulness \(Part I\): What if Design Thinking isn't ultimately about Designing?](#)

"We don't meditate to get better at meditating; we meditate to get better at life." Sharon Salzberg

[Designfulness \(Part II\): Undisciplined by Design](#)

The vital role of integration means that design may be considered an undisciplined discipline, one that balances disciplinary purity with pragmatic expedience.

[Trew: Can Strategy be Playful?](#)

In the list of quotes below, can you determine which ones are referring to military strategy or war, and which ones are from scholars analyzing play?

[2021 San Antonio Innovation Summit - Rescuing Icarus](#)

Introduction to conference breakout sessions using the Lego Serious Play open source method. "When you give your brain a hand, you condition yourself for playfulness." "Wisdom is not limited to what we can communicate through language and logic."

[Reviewing Sinek's The Infinite Game](#)

A few years ago, two of my research interests—strategy and play—collided.

[Forget "The Frozen Middle" \(Orbiting the Giant Hairball\)](#)

Among other topics, we discussed how to nurture a culture of innovation. Our senior leader, 3-star general Stephen Kwast, suggested we read *Orbiting the Giant Hairball: A Corporate Fool's Guide to Surviving with Grace* by the late Gordon A. MacKenzie.

[Do You Show up at Work as Your Full Freaky Self?](#)

As a Battle Director, I worked closely with the COD team every day for the four months of my deployment. This included a 'sync' meeting at the start of every shift. For 124 days straight, I started every one of those meetings the same way, by asking the team if they felt "safe, supported, and stretched in meaningful ways."

TOGA also recommended:

- A person – Jeff DeGraff, University of Michigan (according to his web site, his life mission is to democratize innovation by encouraging self-authorizing behavior.)
- A book – The Accidental Creative: How to Be Brilliant at a Moment's Notice.

These takeaways are overdue for consideration by government and corporate practitioners of innovation and design thinking, emergency preparedness, and leadership development. If you're in contact with any such groups or individuals, why not forward this message?

Participant affiliations

ASPA National Capital Area Chapter
Charlestown, RI local government, Retired
Department of Education/Federal Student Aid
Department of Education, Retired
Department of the Air Force/School of Advanced Air and Space Studies
General Services Administration, Retired
Old Dominion University
Securities and Exchange Commission
United States Agency for International Development (USAID)
U.S. Coast Guard, Retired

Participants joined from Maxwell AFB, AL; the Washington, DC Metro Area; Spotsylvania, VA; Wickford, RI; and Colorado Springs, CO.

Each time, we begin with a round of introductions to warm up the space. Afterward, participants are sent a "Who was in the room" message to facilitate ongoing connection. Please consider joining us in the future. If you know of others of any age, not necessarily in government, who would love to show up for this kind of conversation, please invite them to contact me so I can add them to the list.

Sincerely,
Kitty Wooley



HOW WILL YOU CONTRIBUTE?

Cooperating freely, learning on the fly, empowering ourselves, and navigating unknown waters beyond the edge of the comfort zone are the name of the game. We began our public leadership journey in calm harbors, and now we're surrounded by the white water of constant change. Business as usual isn't working well enough. We choose to gather our strengths and lead from wherever we are, applying our best efforts to the challenges of our time. Are you coming?

Header photo: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Kayakers_in_Redwood_City,_California.jpg