



Seven characteristics of good intelligence¹

By Sid Heal

During the American Revolution, General George Washington advised one of his subordinates, “The necessity of procuring good intelligence is apparent and need not be further urged.”² While no one would seriously dispute the wisdom of this instruction, the question becomes what constitutes “good” intelligence? While there are many factors for vetting information, seven characteristics predominate:

1. Intelligence must be objective.

Objective intelligence is as free as possible from personal prejudices, distortions, feelings or interpretations. Because information can almost always be interpreted more than one way, it is difficult to factor out human predilections with absolute certainty. Even the choice of words in a report can skew the understanding. For example, consider the subtle but meaningful differences between words like anger, rage, fury or wrath. It is critical that information intended to brief a decision-maker precisely convey meaning without bias.

2. Intelligence must be thorough.

Being thorough does not mean exhaustive, only that the information is sufficient to allow a decision-maker to draw reliable conclusions. Indeed, it is impossible to completely remove uncertainty³ in tactical situations and while attempts must always be made to reduce it, insistence on “all the facts” dooms the response to one of reaction because the situation will change faster than it can be exhaustively evaluated.

3. Intelligence must be accurate.

Accuracy simply means that the information is factually correct. Because it is impossible to be exhaustive, accuracy becomes all the more important since decisions will need to be made on whatever information is available.

4. Intelligence must be timely.

Timeliness is so critical to good intelligence that the adage of “late is the same as absent” is often quoted to emphasize this aspect. Some types of information are so time-sensitive that they are immediately relayed to decision-makers without being thoroughly vetted. For example, reports of a suspect outside a containment may be relayed right to the incident commander prior to verification since if the information is correct, actions must be taken immediately.

5. Intelligence must be usable.

While this may seem self-evident, it is becoming increasingly complicated as we rely more and more on electronic data. Besides the variety of portable storage devices like CDs, DVDs, USB flash drives, and so forth, the number of incompatible software application is prolific. Usable also means that it provides a decision-maker with a clear and concise understanding without any additional investment in time and effort. At a minimum, this means that standard formats for intelligence reports and summaries should be mandatory, and ideally text is augmented with graphics, maps, photographs, diagrams and charts.

6. Intelligence must be as relevant as possible.

While it is easy to think of relevant in absolute terms, it is not that easy, especially with large and prolonged operations. Not all intelligence is equally significant to every organizational function or component. Moreover, even with the same intelligence, different echelons of the response organization are going to need different degrees of detail. Because an intrinsic attribute of information is that it is a consumer (in that it consumes human attention), overloading a decision-maker with superfluous or immaterial information is not only distracting but counterproductive.

7. Intelligence must be available.

This means that it must be accessible and in a usable format to provide understanding for decision-makers. Some intelligence is so sensitive that it must be kept secret; secrecy is the antithesis to availability. Consequently, the intelligence apparatus must be designed to provide protection for sensitive information without denying access to decision-makers who need it.

To a greater or lesser degree, each of these characteristics is required for good intelligence but they are not all equal all the time. For example, as described previously, in some circumstances, the importance of timeliness can trump the need for it to be objective and thorough.

Similarly, when assessing information before it becomes intelligence⁴ the value can be greatly degraded or even rendered worthless when one of the characteristics is lacking. For example, what can be accurate can also be irrelevant and what can be objective can still be inaccurate.

The process of vetting information before using it as intelligence requires a process in which the information is automatically *corroborated*, *verified* and *validated*. *Corroboration* means that it is available from more than one source without serious contradiction.⁵ *Verified* identifies the need to examine it for accuracy. For example, an informant or witness can be telling the truth and still be mistaken. *Validating* the information may be thought of as an official stamp of approval by the agency or unit providing the intelligence. It is a declaration of the legitimacy, accuracy or worth of the information. It goes without saying that the reputation of the individual or unit validating the information is inherently and permanently associated with the intelligence.

It would seem that in this information age, when voluminous amounts of data are instantly available in any number of formats, the difficulties in obtaining good intelligence would be greatly diminished. Such

is not the case, however. In reality, the volume of available information has compounded the problem because what we have is information, but what we need is understanding. ◀◀

Endnotes

1. Nearly all of this material is taken from "Intelligence," Marine Corps Doctrinal Publication 2, (MCDP-2) Headquarters United States Marine Corps, Department of the Navy, Washington D.C., 20380-1775.
2. George Washington in a letter to Colonel Elias Dayton, July 26, 1777.
3. For more information on uncertainty as an inherent characteristic of tactical operations, see "Characteristics of Crises and Conflicts," *The Tactical Edge*, Fall 2002, pp. 57-58.
4. For more information on the differences between information and intelligence, see "Gathering and Disseminating Intelligence," *The Tactical Edge*, Spring 2002, pp. 55-56.
5. It is not unusual to have minor discrepancies between two more sources of information, especially when people are the observers.



NTOA congratulates Commander Charles "Sid" Heal on his recent retirement from the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department following 33 years of dedicated service.

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