Leadership in Commercial Intelligence

This study was designed to examine leadership across the client - intelligence service-provider process to offer insights into enhancing decision-making, operational efficiency, and client experience by creating a model that encourages best practices in commercial intelligence leadership.

Context

The Intelligence Cycle comprises four steps, Direction, Collection, Processing and Dissemination. This basic model has stood the test of time since WW2. Operations in this paradigm are characterised as expensive, secret, collection-driven operations in support of strategic inter-state activity (DDCC, 2023).

The research team propose that the democratisation of information services has recently enabled what we term the "Open Intelligence Era". In this paradigm, intelligence operations are characterised by complete openness around the entire cycle; some notable examples operate what the research team define as "Open Agencies" where all processes are published. (Some very sensitive human source identifiers may remain hidden even in these cases.)

It is in this era that commercial "Intelligence-as-a-Service" has emerged. Large corporations with pre-existing physical and cyber security operations have developed a demand for intelligence analysis activities to serve and enhance existing and new security functions.

Method

Clients of Peregrine Risk Management, a commercial security risk advisor, formed the research population. A general invitation to participate was issued across their client base to a range of enterprises. The eligibility criteria required participants to be employed in a role which acts as the security contract manager of a client of Peregrine RM. Each volunteer participated in a semi-structured interview, conducted via MS Teams and feedback on their responses were given by Peregrine RM management.

Research Participants

1. Campaigns Director at Environmental Investigation Agency
2. Director of Health, Safety and Business Continuity at Aston University
3. Global Risk Analyst for a UK media organisation
4. Head of Overseas Visits for a UK publishing company
5. Global Security and Travel Risk Manager at Sulzer

The Integrated Intelligence Service Model (c)
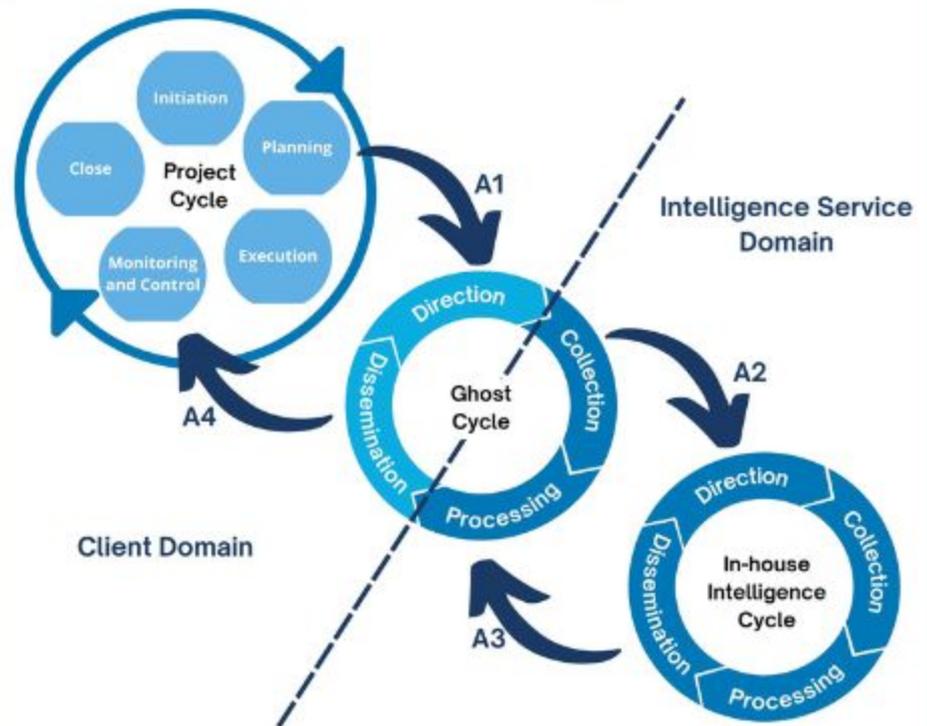
Ghost Cycle

The Integrated Intelligence Service Model (c), generated by this research, shows three discrete but integrated activities operating in two distinct domains, Client and Intelligence Service. Touch-points are perceived differently in each domain as neither has visibility or direct access to the activity in the other.

The separation of processes explains and is explained by the integrity of the client and service-provider's operational activity cycles. The two internal domains activities are linked by a "Ghost Cycle" of which neither is aware.

We don't have that expertise... we can't be trusted to ask the right questions' - Interviewee 4
Clients run their own internal project or operations cycle. The decision to engage an external intelligence service happens early in the process and is rarely revisited (A1). The input to the service-provider is therefore relatively generalised and characterised by service-level (cost-point; service-package) rather than a nuanced interrogation of the focal question by intelligence professionals and the decision-maker. Clients budget for and contract the level of intelligence service they judge they require at the project planning stage, which is rarely re-negotiated mid-project. This activity informs the level of collection or open source research conducted and made available (A2).

The intelligence service provider, meanwhile, is running a situational awareness activity which operates internally to underpin future contracts (A3). This manifests to the client as the service deliverable as part of their monitoring and control activity (A4) not as part of planning or execution.

Power Gradient

The service provision operates within an unacknowledged power gradient which varies according to the type of contract. Our focus was on leadership but this concept did not resonate in either domain. Instead, the participants spoke of "requirements" and good communications rather than fixed assessment processes and driving the activity of the other partners.

'Their advice is that travelling to that region of the world is fine and we actually know it's not' - Interviewee 2
Clients can be distrustful of unexpected assessments and follow their own pre-existing judgment regardless. In the Western intelligence services, the need for leaders to accept and react to subordinates, "speaking truth to power" has been developed over decades (Henley, 2019). In the new commercial intelligence era, where the intelligence cycle is contracted, this power gradient is much more pronounced.

Challenging Assumptions: Clients as Intelligence Providers
Clients may be oblivious to the intelligence process and must be led by the service provider (Crump, 2015, p.114 and Robson-Morrow, 2019, p.39). Interviewee 3 contradicts this premise by recounting a time they provided intelligence to Peregrine RM during an incident. In this scenario, the client was acting within the other domain.

'Don't go here it's dangerous... but actually if you do this, it isn't that dangerous' - Interviewee 2
Simultaneously, when a country has been deemed unsafe, clients use the service to be told how to minimise their risks. They could have no intention to change their original plan but the disseminated intelligence has an impact on their monitoring and control (A4).

Communications vs Process

All participants emphasised that their business relationships are built on good personal relationships and frequent informal communications including in-person conversations, WhatsApp groups and on-demand phone/ Teams conversations. Peregrine RM indicated that they intend to formalise their external communications as they scale the business.

"We've got full oversight and transparency..." - Interviewee 3
Clients appreciated the 24/7 WhatsApp channel offered by Peregrine RM for short notice Q&A. This full-time availability increased clients perception of reliability; they know they will get a response no matter when a critical incident occurs.

'The ease of asking silly questions or admitting a lack of knowledge' - Interviewee 4
Interviewee 4 highlighted the necessity of frequent and open communication with the intelligence service for clarification on technical jargon. The established trust and rapport between client and service-provider made it easier for clients to call attention to problems and ask 'silly questions', improving their customer relationship management.

Situational Awareness vs Risk Analysis vs Command-led Decision Making
Effective communication underpins all commercial intelligence operations. None characterised this as "leadership", or "tasking" or other such terms which appear in the military doctrine. Rather, all subjects emphasised the importance of personal relationships, open channels of communication and trust.

Client concern: single point of failure
Interviewee 2 expressed concern that if they left their organisation, the client/ service-provider relationship with the next security contract manager would not be as good and might negatively affect business. Peregrine RM management questioned the likelihood that clients remained clients due to a sense of personal loyalty and friendship with the two co-founders. This reinforces the notion that good communication and rapport has a large influence on maintaining that business relationship.

References

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