



by Nicholas A. Rich

I recently spent a weekend with a good friend. After the long weekend, I received a message from him thanking me for being both a friend, and a “*thought partner*.” I met him in the Army in 2015, and we deployed to Iraq together in December 2016. He has been a pace-setter in every organization he’s been a part of, including nowadays as a civilian in Washington D.C. After the weekend, I reflected on our friendship and took a moment to appreciate a connection that I wouldn’t have had without the Army guiding me to it. Throughout our friendship this thought partner has helped me navigate a handful of different experiences, he even challenged and motivated me to go through Ranger School as a logistics officer. Out of the Army he provides other insights about how to integrate technology, think about funding, or utilize different leadership styles. From this friendship, I continue to grow.

I had never heard of a “thought partner” (maybe I’m behind), and my curiosity brought me to research the term. Various sources resulted in the composite definition:

“Thought partnership involves individuals [sharing ideas](#) and experiences to navigate particularly complex and difficult challenges that are [mutually beneficial](#).”

I saw a natural place for seeking thought partnership in the Army. It’s something we might not know can be as advantageous as it is - easily overlooked, and often underutilized.

A thought partner helps you look from the outside in, providing fresh insight from their knowledge or general experience. Varying backgrounds and experiences provide the bedrock of thought partnership. For example, thought partners may work in different units, be in different backgrounds, and should have differing methods for viewing the world.

A thought partner provides an audience to challenge and vet your thoughts. Challenge allows us to fine-tune our cross-cultural communication skills. Not only does a thought partner provide a challenge, but they can also help you ensure you are not falling prey to your own biases.

Annie Duke, author of *Thinking in Bets* describes a “truthseeking charter.” Duke’s chapter focuses on [three tenets](#) that apply directly to thought partnership: a focus on accuracy versus confirmation, accountability that occurs consistently, and openness to a diversity of ideas. Where thought partners meet these criteria, their bond can prevent errant assumptions and lend mutual insight to difficult problems.

The Army provides educational and work environments ideal for beginning, fostering, and growing thought partnership. Starting early in BOLC and continuing on through each Professional Military Education (PME) milestone, the Army creates spaces for young leaders to connect to potential thought partners. The interdisciplinary small group, like a staff anywhere in the Army, facilitates the integration and sharing of experience, knowledge, and education that puts you onto the ground floor of developing a thought partnership. Partnerships can be fostered outside the workplace, through friendship and shared hobbies. Our thought partners can help us digest what is important or true in what we’ve read, and share ideas from what they’ve learned. This cross-pollination creates that growth that Thought Partnership offers.

Importantly, there should be a routine. If you’re co-located with your thought partner, finding a practical way to connect outside of a formal environment is essential. The best way is to find a consistent time to meet and sit down and compare notes. It could be after a weekly meeting, breakfast every Monday, or a call every other Saturday. It could be a conversation outside of your unit to parallel and understand efforts, sharing end-of-quarter or end-of-month lessons learned, asking each other where you’re pushing boundaries and

making communication and processes more effective or where those efforts need more focus.

What are the benefits of thought partnership? Interestingly, the benefits are based on individuals' experiences from previous roles, responsibilities, expertise, and environments. In General (Ret.) Martin Dempsey's white paper [published](#) in 2010, *The Profession of Arms*, he states that, "Professions produce uniquely expert work, not routine or repetitive work." In the uniquely expert work within our profession, a thought partnership produces exponential rewards. We will never experience the same things our peers will. We each have our individual insights and sharing that knowledge is the only way to get better. It's in our organizational DNA to grow ourselves and others.

Interdisciplinary thought partnership forces us to pursue opportunities and challenges outside our comfort zone. As a logistician, I chose to experience a depth of cross-disciplinary training and experience first-hand, going through what others experience, training how they train, and putting myself in unfamiliar situations, such as attending Ranger School, an Army Leadership school that teaches light Infantry tactics. Of course, there are myriad and better ways to be interdisciplinary that produce even more effective results. However, this challenging experience, motivated by a thought partnership, has also started many conversations with other logistics and support officers about how the experience helped me become a more well-rounded and effective leader.

To be a thought partner, no special expertise is required; you just have to care about your friend or team and their growth. Effective thought partnership can be as simple as giving your friend a call after they return from a trip and learning what you can. While life may get busy, it's important to make time for these connections. We often lose the follow-up on relationships that could pay dividends by teaching us significant lessons learned over time. A thought partnership is a relationship worth both the personal and professional investment.

While it may be hard to carve out the time for thought partnership when you move from established relationships, it can still provide a tremendous mutual benefit. Thought partnership protects your Soldiers, grows your critical thinking skills, and expedites mission accomplishment. Your relationships may feel one-sided, like you are only learning from your partner, yet the response to these relationships will be similar to the message I received, "thanks for being a thought partner." In short, you both might be growing together more than you think.

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