NPIC Case Study

In 1961, in the final days of his presidency, President Eisenhower created the National Photographic Interpretation Center (NPIC) as a center for analyzing aerial intelligence. The need for sophisticated imagery analysis exploded with the launch of CIA’s U-2 program in the mid 1950’s and the development of satellite imagery in the 1960s and 1970s.

By the early 1980’s, NPIC suffered from:

 •A strong perception of parochial management in which analysts doing similar work in different groups were being promoted on different schedules and on different criteria

 •A strong perception, reinforced by demographics, that women and minorities would not be promoted to leadership positions

 •Outmoded and inadequate computer technology that could not keep pace with the mission

 •The new challenge of relocatable targets, namely the Soviet mobile missile threat (SS-20s)

 •The need to hire hundreds of new analysts

 •The need to expand the structure and the infrastructure

 •The results of a recent IG report that highlighted all these issues and occasioned a leadership change

Rae Huffstutler became director in February 1984. The next month, Huffstutler started a series of ~~held~~ monthly overnight off-sites at Port Deposit, Maryland with all employees and managers. He asked the same three questions over forty-seven sessions:

1. What is going well in the organization?
2. What is not going well in the organization?
3. What are we doing that we should stop because it is unhelpful, and what should we be doing that we need to start?

Rae's executive officer, Jack Elberti, ran the sessions.  Every group chief or his or her deputy (the top six leaders within the 100-450-person organization) had to attend each session and listen to each group in the readout session on the evening of the first day and the second morning. Rae gave actions in front of the audience when appropriate.

While the evening was unstructured, with some groups shooting pool, playing cards or trivial pursuit, and most drinking, it was the time the old timers and the senior managers would told stories to the younger people. Employees learned the unwritten history, and what senior people did when they were young, and who the NPIC heroes (and goats) were.

Port Deposit Session logistics and agenda

**Day One**

10:00 Start (Drive up early from DC)

10:30 Jack Elberti focused groups of six to eight making sure that they followed the order of the questions ~~on Question 1~~.   He mixed groups in six to eight members so that there was representation from every part of NPIC --analysts, scientists, support, developers, technologists.

12:30 Lunch Back in groups by 1:15.

4:00 Senior managers arrived. Rae addressed everyone in the big room for 10-15 minutes. Then he sat down in the front row with a yellow legal pad ***and listened intently*** as the first two groups reported out their answers to the three questions for 30-40 minutes.  After the reports, it was Miller or exercise time till Dinner at 6:00.

7:30 Rae gave a short intelligence update about what differences NPIC was making in the IC for about 30 minutes followed by free time in the evening.

**Day Two** started at

8:00 After breakfast, everyone assembled in the main room and the final three groups presented answers to the three questions. Again, Rae ***listened intently*** When they finished, Rae asked if there were any additional questions that hadn't come up. Next, Ray

1. Went through his notes and asked for clarifications.

2. Talked about the status of problems he was working on including a new personnel management process, a technology upgrade, strategic relocatable targets, arms control, hiring, and relations with CIA and DIA, and NRO.

3. Covered NPIC's upcoming challenges in intelligence, technology, training, building renovations, budget, and other initiatives.  People asked questions during this session.  Then they broke for lunch.

After lunch, group chiefs made short presentations about their assignments, how they would address the concerns, and when they would report back.  The session finished at 2:00.

The three questions were both liberating and disciplined.  They spurred lots of new ideas, but they also forced the bureaucracy to do their jobs as the employees could and did talk directly to the director.  There were many times when managers told Rae that the new computers were working great, and then employees would tell him that they were broken down and slow and required a 8-step workarounds.

Years later, someone wrote Jack O’Connor, as he worked on his NPIC book,\* that after the sessions, "We'd be so fired up that on the drive back to DC, we would think about going back to Building 213 to get at it."

At these meetings, when Rae was installing a new personnel management system, every employee and manager got a written copy of the criteria, and this got rid of the previous smoke-filled room method.  There were still bad managers, but the word started to spread about the good ones; everyone knew which managers people did not want to work for.

These off-sites generated considerable peer pressure in a good way.  Internally, NPIC became transparent and everything was shared top to bottom. Visibly, every employee at these offsites saw senior leadership in action—listening to all levels of the organization, connecting the internal work to external policy and intelligence outcomes, describing the future challenges, and the current work the director was doing on their behalf. NPIC transformed into an extraordinary organization and produced more future Intelligence leaders than any other Intelligence Community organization. \*

Study questions:

*Why did the same three questions not become stale over forty-seven sessions?*

*What do you think about Rae skipping over the chain-of-command to listen to employees?*

*What negative aspects of human nature did this approach overcome and what positive aspects of human nature did this technique leverage?*

*How does this technique fit with “insight nudges?”*

*What impact do you think this technique had on accountability, empowerment, and organizational performance?*

*Mike Mears and Jack O’Connor, author of NPIC Seeing the Secrets Growing the Leaders: A cultural history of the National Photographic Interpretation Center*