

## Tackling Gray Rhinos Discussion Notes 30 July 2020

### Agenda

- **Introduction**
- **Background & History**
- **Definitions & Concepts**
- **The Problems: Dynamics in the IC and DoD**
- **Some Solutions**
- **Future Publications & Resources**
- **Examples & Questions**

Based on “**Tackling Gray Rhinos: Managing High Probability, High Impact Threats**” and “**Tackling Gray Rhinos II: The Value of Disposable Visionaries and Cassandras**” by Chris Ventura NIU Office of Research

### **Introduction**

Michele Wucker coined the term gray rhino at the World Economic Forum in Davos 2013 and authored the book “The Gray Rhino: How to Recognize and Act on the Obvious Dangers We Ignore.” In July 2017, financial authorities in China warned to watch for “gray rhinos -- obvious dangers that are often ignored.” We will discuss two articles this morning that I published in 2018. The articles have adopted the key concepts provided in Wucker’s treatment of the topic and several other key authors’ work and applied them to the US Intelligence Community and Department of Defense.

Gray Rhinos are highly probable, high impact yet neglected threats: kin to both the elephant in the room and the improbable and unforeseeable black swan. Disposable visionaries are highly capable, competent and innovative employees who are often driven out of their organizations. Cassandras are individuals who provide warning of future crises who are often ignored due to various biases. The IC and DoD can improve their performance with regard to both warning and risk management by recognizing the links between long-term crises and their respective ability to foster an environment that attracts, develops and retains intelligence officers and managers who are best suited to address gray rhinos.

We may not be able to foresee the details or the timing, but the outlines of the biggest threats facing us are often hard to ignore in the IC and DoD. As Wucker states, the situations related to black swans differ significantly from gray rhinos. The very refusal to recognize what ought to be an obvious threat is part of the gray rhino phenomenon. For a gray rhino to exist, enough has to have gone wrong that a threat is looming and a crisis becomes highly probable. At least, some credible experts, often dismissed as Cassandras, or driven out of their agencies as disposable visionaries, will have sounded the alarm. People should know that something bad is going to happen, maybe not during their watch, but someday.

Much of the emphasis on anticipatory analysis, warning or simply analytic tradecraft focuses on the work of individual line analysts and does not acknowledge greater issues in the Intelligence Community or DoD, many of which are rooted in bureaucracy, resource issues or culture.

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### Appendix A: Glossary

**Black Swans** – An event which is deemed improbable yet causes massive consequences

**Cassandra** – In Greek mythology, Cassandra was cursed with the ability to see impending doom, but the inability to persuade anyone to believe her. The warnings she provided were frequently ridiculed and disregarded by her peers. She descended into madness and ultimately became one of the victims of the tragedy she foretold. Modern “Cassandras” often share a similar fate.

**Disposable Visionaries** - Employees with the greatest vision and motivation do not have the time or even the ability to worry about politics; those organizations comfortable with the status quo can't deal with the many things that are necessary to focus, stimulate, and implement progressive change. A pattern is seen in this group of otherwise intelligent, industrious, and motivated people. They often commit the political equivalent of suicide in their jobs by speaking out too much and too often. They push for change. They pursue the corporate vision often with a greater zeal than their managers. They make others in their organizations uncomfortable for a variety of reasons. While employed, they are unceasingly innovative, constantly questioning the status quo, challenging fundamental assumptions about the business, and helping to create or reinforce the vision of the organization. Their passion is not always welcomed, understood or long suffered. In return for their persistence for improvement, they are rewarded with labels such as “disruptive,” “uncooperative,” “intolerant,” “impatient,” “Not-team-players,” “troublemakers,” and “uncollaborative.”

**Gray Rhino** - A “gray rhino” is a highly probable, high impact yet neglected threat: kin to both the elephant in the room and the improbable and unforeseeable black swan. Gray rhinos are not random surprises, but occur after a series of warnings and visible evidence. Michele Wucker coined the term at the World Economic Forum in Davos 2013 and authored the book “The Gray Rhino: How to Recognize and Act on the Obvious Dangers We Ignore.”

**Medici Effect** – “The Medici Effect: Breakthrough Insights at the Intersection of Ideas, Concepts, and Cultures” is a book written by Frans Johansson. “The Medici Effect” is a term coined by Johansson and used throughout various industries to describe innovation that happens when disciplines and ideas intersect. Johansson argues that innovation comes from diverse industries, cultures, and disciplines when they all intersect, bringing ideas from one field into another. He also recommends assembling diverse teams of people to collaborate on innovation.

**Pareto Principle** - The Pareto principle (also known as the 80/20 rule, the law of the vital few, or the principle of factor sparsity) states that, for many events, roughly 80% of the effects come from 20% of the causes.

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<b>APPENDIX B: DYNAMICS OF A WARNING MANAGEMENT PROBLEM</b>			
<b>THE WARNING ISSUE</b>	<b>SENIOR DECISION MAKER'S RESPONSE</b>	<b>THE CASSANDRA OR DV RESPONSE</b>	<b>THE CRITICS' RESPONSE</b>
<b>Response Availability</b> – Can this problem be prevented or mitigated with an appropriate response?	<b>Diffusion of Responsibility</b> – Uncertain of who has the responsibility to detect the warning, evaluate it and decide to act.	<b>Proven Technical Expert</b> – Accredited experts, recognized in their fields, who discover information or develop conclusions others have not yet discovered e.g. a <i>“disposable visionary.”</i>	<b>Scientific Reticence</b> – A high scientific standard of proof cannot be met in time to act. Scientists and decision makers in denial may argue to wait for the final results or for additional studies.
<b>Initial Occurrence Syndrome</b> – If the event has “never happened before” in the cultural memory of the audience they may then resist taking it seriously.	<b>Agenda Inertia</b> – Strict adherence to an agenda or plan that leaves no room for consideration of the unforeseeable or unanticipated threats. Also, dealing with the unforeseen may take resources away from leadership’s pet issues.	<b>Off-Putting Personality</b> – Individuals who may be competent and credible and may care deeply about a mission or task at hand but who may appear at times to be obsessive, abrasive, intolerant or impatient with others e.g. a <i>“disposable visionary.”</i>	<b>Personal or Professional Investment</b> – People with something to lose from the revelation of a risk, or from the solutions, may be critical for illegitimate reasons based on self-interest or “rice bowls.”
<b>Erroneous Consensus</b> – To take comfort in the consensus opinion of experts and to reject or persecute the outlier who may later prove to be correct.	<b>Complexity Mismatch</b> – A warning which may require complex explanation or interpretation by experts and may require a level of understanding which may not be common.	<b>Data Driven</b> – Individuals whose interpretation of available or generated data reveal a problem or threat with unique clarity that others cannot see e.g. a <i>“disposable visionary.”</i>	<b>Non-Expert Rejection</b> – Some ideas gain general expert acceptance but are still heavily assailed by non-experts, who may be interested in keeping things as they are or to not act to prevent or mitigate a disaster.
<b>Magnitude Overload</b> – The sheer size of the problem overwhelms people and causes them to shut down - “ostrich effect.” Also, the inability to magnify understanding for massive losses of life - “scope neglect.”	<b>Ideological Response Rejection</b> – Rejection to responses to a risk because they do not conform to an accepted ideology.	<b>Orthogonal Thinker</b> – Original or fresh thinking to see an issue from a new perspective and incorporate data or concepts from other fields e.g. a <i>“disposable visionary.”</i>	<b>“Now is Not the Time” Fallacy</b> – Some critics know better than to deride experts or question technical data. Instead, they try to minimize the urgency and defer consideration due to more urgent issues, constrained resources or the need to involve other people.
<b>Outlandishness</b> – To dismiss predictions of problems that seem to be works of fiction and not worthy of serious discussion.	<b>Profiles in Cowardice</b> – If a leader or collective leadership is overly cautious, concerned about damage to their reputation if they are wrong, or simply lacks personal courage to handle a threat, they may turn a deaf ear to a Cassandra warning.	<b>Questioner</b> – Individuals who challenge what is generally accepted until it is proven to their satisfaction e.g. a <i>“disposable visionary.”</i>	
<b>Invisible Obvious</b> – To be blinded to things because of their ubiquity or obviousness, especially if people are concentrating their attention elsewhere.	<b>“Satisficing”</b> – A token response, often the first and easiest option available, that addresses an issue but may not solve it.	<b>Sense of Personal Responsibility</b> – An individual who goes beyond “due diligence” because of a sense of responsibility to fully and clearly explain a threat and the cost of inaction e.g. a <i>“disposable visionary.”</i>	
	<b>Inability to Discern the Unusual</b> – A warning may be blocked from a higher-level decision maker due to a lack of an ability to discern the urgency or nature (routine or unusual event) of an issue.	<b>High Anxiety</b> – Some individuals with higher intelligence and higher anxiety are often better able to discern and focus on primary threat information e.g. “broken alarm clocks” who sound off on minor issues. They are not the most useful Cassandras.	Table adapted from <b>“Warnings: Finding Cassandras to Stop Catastrophes”</b> by Richard A. Clarke and R.P. Eddy

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### Appendix C: Examples of Biased Gray Rhino Discussions with Disposable Visionaries or Cassandras

Adapted from “The Disposable Visionary: A Survival Guide for Change Agents” by Curtis Powell and Bill Jerome”- The leadership obstacle course to protect the status quo:

- **The pass the buck hurdle:** “Have you run this through the normal channels?”
- **The “tried and true” block:** “We don’t do things like that here.”
- **The “clock’s running out” barrier:** “It’s too late to consider other ideas now.”
- **The razzle-dazzle:** “No one’s ever done it that way before.” Immediately followed by, “Someone must have already done it that way,” or “Someone must have already tried it that way and decided it didn’t work, so let’s put that aside.”
- **The storage locker strategy:** “Maybe we’ll consider that at a later time.”
- **The “not really wiser, but we’ll make them think I am” bluff:** “When you’ve been around a little longer, you’ll understand why we can’t go that way.”
- **The teamwork or collaboration scapegoat:** “I’m not sure the other branches, directorates or agencies will be comfortable with that.”
- **The team podiatry ploy:** “Let’s make sure the other branches, directorates or agencies are onboard before we consider that. We don’t want step on others toes or seem like we are getting out too far ahead of them.”

#### Key References:

“The Gray Rhino: How to Recognize and Act on the Obvious Dangers We Ignore” by Michele Wucker

“The Disposable Visionary: A Survival Guide for Change Agents” by Curtis Powell and Bill Jerome

“Warnings: Finding Cassandras to Stop Catastrophes” by Richard A. Clarke and R.P. Eddy

“Anticipating Surprise: Analysis for Strategic Warning” by Cynthia Grabo

“Strategic Advantage” by Bruce Berkowitz

“The Molecule of More: How a Single Chemical in Your Brain Drives Love, Sex, and Creativity—and Will Determine the Fate of the Human Race” by Dr. Daniel Lieberman and Michael E. Long

“The Medici Effect, What Elephants and Epidemics Can Teach Us About Innovation” by Franz Johansson

“Paradigms - The Business of Discovering the Future” by Joel Arthur Barker