(U) Team Writing Projects: Too Many Cooks Spoil the Soup?

FROM: ▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮
the SIDtoday editor
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(U) Here's another in an intermittent series of articles on general writing subjects (i.e. NOT specifically about the writing of SIGINT reports)... This one offers somesuggestions on how to tackle group writing assignments:

(U) Bottom line: *SIGINT* may be a "team sport," but *editing* is not!

(U) There has been much talk in recent years about the advantages of collaboration, and most agree that tapping into expertise -- wherever it may reside -- is usually a good thing. But while the concept is good, the execution also needs to be sound in order to get good results. What am I getting at? Just this:

(U) **Even a collaborative effort requires that someone play the role of leader.** Would the Sistine Chapel have turned out better if 10 art critics had been enlisted to "help out" old Michelangelo? Would an orchestra make harmonious music with 5 co-conductors up on stage at the same time all waving batons? I think you see the point: every endeavor needs a directing hand, a unified vision... call it what you will.

(U) **Writing is no exception.** One person needs to take the lead. If a group of people-- especially people representing different organizations -- all try to help draft a text, you wind up with a chaotic mishmash of competing priorities and writing styles... And to compound the problem, when people try to take a "consensus" approach to writing, oftentimes the observations and opinions-- which can be the most interesting bits!-- get taken out, because the group may not all share exactly the same view. The "compromise" wording that's left is watered down, bland, and potentially confusing.

(U) This observation is not new... there's a reason why the term "written by committee" (usually accompanied by a grimace!) has entered the popular lexicon. But that prompts the question: why do people keep doing it? How does this keep happening?

(U) Here's one way:

- Someone (we'll call her Mona) is asked to write up a paper about a topic, but the topic is complex and involves work done by several different offices.
- Mona asks representatives from all of the various offices to collaborate. In an attempt to be "corporate," Mona suggests that they all contribute equally to drafting the paper.
- Mona offers to get the ball rolling, draws up a draft, and shares it with the entire group. The representatives all make their own edits over the course of days and weeks.*
- Finally, Mona is left to try to satisfy everyone by combining

the (potentially contradictory) edits and hoping it all makes sense when it comes out the other side.

(U) Mona may have had good intentions, but the above project is clearly in trouble! So, how can this scenario be avoided? Here's what I suggest as a better process:

- Right up front, the team has to settle upon a single person to serve as writer and editor.
- The writer/editor (let's call her Felicity) draws up an outline for how the paper will be organized, what the content should be, etc., and determines what details are needed to flesh out the text.
- Felicity asks team members to provide input as necessary-- *just the facts* .
- Using the facts provided, Felicity weaves them all together into a coherent text that is consistent in style.
- Felicity sends out the draft *for comment only.* Team members should not do any wordsmithing or editing in general; they should simply state their suggestions and concerns to Felicity.
- Felicity then reviews the comments, and makes any *factual* corrections needed. If there are no disagreements as to the *conclusions* reached, the paper is done!
- If however, the various team members do not agree on the conclusions reached, or on other opinions expressed, it is Felicity's duty to objectively document in the text who believes what, such as: "The entire team accepts that XYZ is true; however, ORG1 advocates taking such-and-such steps, while ORG2 believes that such-and-such is the better course of action."

(U) In a nutshell, *the paper needs to be drafted by one person using input from the group -- not drafted by the group collectively.* I believe this approach not only saves everyone time and energy in the long run, but leads to a better end product. Anyone reading the resulting paper will know: 1) what everyone agrees to be true, and 2) what people disagree on, and why. This is much more useful information than a whitewashed attempt at consensus.

(U) There *are* occasions, however, when the intent is to come up with the "official NSA (or IC, or whatever) stance" on a subject, meaning that we are expected to speak with one voice. Here, again, the above process gives the desired result: the appropriate managers can review the paper, weigh the pros and cons of the various arguments, and make the call. By allowing the managers to see the rival arguments (instead of papering them over), you are helping them make well-informed, well-considered decisions.

(U) Notes:

* (U) In terms of the mechanics of how the draft is edited, sometimes the text is sent around via email, which poses the danger of everyone making their own edits in parallel and multiple versions being generated. That can get very complicated very quickly! Another common approach is for everyone to make incremental changes to a single document, such as by posting the text on a wiki. While that is a more orderly process, it may still result in a "mishmash of competing priorities and writing styles" in the absence of a single editor.

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