

How spies think – book review

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Insights into senior intelligence analysts' work by David Omand

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Spies do not typically share their thoughts. 'How Spies Think' by Sir David Omand is an insight into how senior intelligence officials make decisions, anticipate threats, maximise opportunities and build strategic partnerships.

A former Director of GCHQ and Cabinet Office security and intelligence coordinator turned academic, Omand is a well-qualified guide. Although we may rarely negotiate with rogue Serbian generals ourselves, he suggests that by thinking like intelligence analysts, we can all make better decisions in our own lives.

SEES

His methodology uses the mnemonic 'SEES':

- situational awareness
- explanation
- estimates
- strategic notice

Omand warns that cognitive bias can ruin your decision-making, discusses what makes strategic partnerships go the distance and lays out the threat of digital subversion to unprepared democracies. Finally, in a speculative scenario set in 2027, he explains how internal and external enemies could destabilise the UK with cyberattacks and misinformation.

Omand's careful, dry prose is laced with examples from history. These are helpful, as he does not wear his learning lightly: he nearly lost me in an early chapter that explained Bayesian logic with a fiendish-looking equation, and the most memorable quotes are from other world leaders.

Cognitive bias

While SEES may interest senior police leaders, the book's greatest value to investigators may be his section on cognitive biases – lessons Omand may have learned the hard way after the Iraq War.

Confirmation bias – seeking information that fits your preferred hypothesis – is well known in policing. But Omand also identifies disconfirmation bias as the fierce scrutiny of anything that doesn't fit your world view, while letting information that does fit go unchallenged. Analysts might also rely too much on outdated information or fail to distinguish between assessments based on hard evidence from those based on assumptions. Be clear about what you know, what you don't know, what you think and which is which.

Other mistakes include assuming your opponent will treat facts the same way as you (mirror imaging) or assess situations like you (transferred judgement). You might not change your initial assessment in the face of mounting evidence against it (perseveration) or fail to collect information about deprioritised threats (limited information). You might be deliberately deceived. Knowledge of cognitive bias does not protect you, and systemic solutions must pull the emergency brakes when individuals and teams fail to notice it.

Partnerships

On partnerships, Omand suggests that purely transactional arrangements may bring short-term results but will fail at times when one partner needs more than the other. Partnerships endure when both parties bring something different to the table (for example, the UK's expertise and the USA's resources).

When negotiating, nothing is agreed until everything is, so always set a best alternative to a negotiated agreement (BATNA) – this is your backstop if proceedings collapse. Trust is key – the Brexit negotiations are his example of what not to do.

Summary

In summary, 'How Spies Think' offers decision-making advice for senior leaders, a fascinating and timely examination of cognitive biases and a useful guide to making strategic partnerships that last. It is often dry, but Omand's career anecdotes and lessons from modern history spice it up.

For me, the most memorable advice was from Omand's former boss, Jack Straw: 'when in doubt, do the right thing'. That 'right thing' usually looks harder than the alternatives. A tough lesson, but Omand doesn't do easy ones.

- This article was peer reviewed by Sergeant Graeme Hepper, Metropolitan Police Service.

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