INTELLIGENCE · ANALYSIS AND TRADECRAFT

Red Teaming and Devil's Advocacy

Red teaming and devil's advocacy deliberately challenge a group's leading view before it becomes a decision. This article explains the main techniques, what research says about whether they work and how to use them well in business and government.

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Every analysis rests on a view that someone could challenge. The danger is that no one does. Teams that agree quickly, that share the same background or that report to a confident leader can settle on a conclusion without testing it. Red teaming and devil's advocacy are structured ways of making sure the test happens. They assign people the job of arguing against the leading view, imagining how an adversary would act or explaining how a plan might fail. This article describes the main techniques, the evidence on their effects and the conditions under which they help.

Why challenge is needed

Janis (1972) showed how cohesive groups of capable people made poor foreign-policy decisions because members suppressed doubts to preserve agreement. Heuer (1999) explained a related problem at the level of the individual analyst: once a mindset forms, new information is interpreted to fit it, and the analyst rarely notices. In both cases the remedy is the same. Someone must be given permission, and preferably an obligation, to argue the other side.

The main techniques

Pherson and Heuer (2021) group several methods under the heading of challenge analysis. Four are widely used.

- **Devil's advocacy.** One person or a small group builds the strongest possible case against the prevailing judgement. The aim is not to win but to expose weak evidence and untested assumptions.
- **Team A / Team B.** Two teams each develop the best case for competing views on a disputed question, then present them side by side to decision-makers.
- **Red teaming.** A team takes the role of an adversary, competitor or other outside party and tries to anticipate or defeat the organisation's plan. Zenko (2015) describes red teams in the military, in security testing and in business, where they probe defences, simulate competitor responses and question strategy.
- **The premortem.** Before a decision is final, the team imagines that it has been carried out and has failed badly, and each member writes down the reasons (Klein, 2007).

Four ways to challenge an analysis

What each technique does and when it fits

Technique	What it does	Best used when
Devil's advocacy	One person argues against the leading view	A consensus has formed quickly
Team A / Team B	Two teams build the strongest case for rival views	Experts are split on a key question
Red teaming	A team thinks and acts as the adversary or competitor	Plans depend on how others will react
Premortem	Assume the plan failed; explain why	Just before a decision is final

Compiled from Pherson and Heuer (2021), Zenko (2015) and Klein (2007); table by ModQu

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Figure 1. Four ways to challenge an analysis. Each assigns someone the task of arguing against the leading view, but they suit different situations. Compiled from Pherson and Heuer (2021), Zenko (2015) and Klein (2007); table by ModQu.

What the research shows

Experimental research on these techniques is encouraging, with caveats. Schweiger et al. (1986) compared groups using devil's advocacy, dialectical inquiry (a formal debate between a plan and a counter-plan) and simple consensus. The groups that used structured conflict produced better assumptions and recommendations, although members were less satisfied with the process. Schwenk (1990), in a meta-analysis, found that both devil's advocacy and dialectical inquiry led to better decisions than approaches that relied on expert recommendation alone.

The premortem draws on a finding by Mitchell et al. (1989): when people imagine that an event has already happened, they generate more reasons to explain it than when they consider whether it might happen. Asking "why did this fail?" therefore surfaces more risks than asking "what could go wrong?".

There is an important qualification. Nemeth et al. (2001) found that authentic dissent, from someone who genuinely holds a different view, stimulated more and better thinking than a devil's advocate playing a role. Group members may discount an assigned critic as merely going through the motions. Role-played challenge is better than none, but organisations should also make it safe for genuine dissenters to speak.

Making red teaming work

Zenko (2015) and the British Ministry of Defence's red teaming handbook (Development, Concepts and Doctrine Centre, 2021) agree on several conditions for success:

1. **Leadership support.** The person who owns the decision must want to hear the challenge and must be willing to act on it. A red team whose findings are ignored wastes its effort and soon loses credibility.
2. **Independence.** Red team members should be far enough outside the planning team to see it critically, yet close enough to understand it. Members who report to the plan's author are unlikely to attack it hard.
3. **Clear scope.** The team needs a defined question: test this assumption, anticipate this competitor's response, find the weak points in this security plan.
4. **The right people.** Effective red teamers combine knowledge of the subject with a willingness to think differently and the tact to deliver uncomfortable findings.
5. **Timing.** Challenge is most useful before commitments are made. A red team convened after a decision is announced tends to become a justification exercise.

Common mistakes

The most frequent failure is ritual. If devil's advocacy becomes a box to tick, the advocate offers mild objections that are easily dismissed and the group leaves more confident than before. Rotating the role, rewarding strong challenges and recording which objections turned out to matter all help. A second mistake is to confuse a red team with a review panel. A review checks quality; a red team argues against the conclusion. A third is using the same red team for every problem, so that its members gradually adopt the organisation's own assumptions.

A business illustration

A Canadian software company plans to enter the Australian market with a lower price than local rivals. Before the board approves the plan, the strategy team runs a short premortem: it is now two years later and the entry has failed. Within half an hour the team lists reasons: a rival matched the price within weeks, local procurement rules favoured established vendors and the support team could not cover Australian business hours. A separate red team, playing the main local competitor, concludes that price matching would be cheap for that rival. The plan is revised to compete on service and integration rather than price alone.

Conclusion

Red teaming and devil's advocacy turn criticism from a personal risk into an assigned task. Research shows that structured challenge improves the quality of assumptions and decisions, especially when it comes before commitments are made and when leaders are willing to listen. The techniques do not replace genuine diversity of views, but they make it far more likely that weak reasoning is found before it becomes costly.

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