“Sharpen the Saw”
How to get to and stay at your analytical best

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Having taught Criminal Intelligence Analysis for the past five years I have come to understand that one of the strongest analytical tools my students possess is between their ears. The problem is that tool doesn’t always get the exercise it needs to stay sharp. In Stephen Covey’s book, The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People, he outlines a process he termed “sharpen the saw.” As a strong supporter of this process, I integrated it into the training, and advocate it’s inclusion in every analyst’s daily routine. I have interpreted the original process proposed by Mr. Covey to better meet the needs of the analyst.

**Benefits of Exercise**

It has been well documented that muscles that are not exercised daily will atrophy over time. MayoClinic.com provides 7 benefits of regular physical activity:

1. Strengthen your cardiovascular and respiratory systems
2. Keep bones and muscles strong
3. Manage your weight
4. Prevent and manage diabetes
5. Ease depression and manage pain and stress
6. Reduce your risk of certain types of cancer
7. Sleep better

(http://www.mayoclinic.com/health/exercise/HQ01676)

If the physical exercising of major and minor muscles can provide so many benefits, then it stands to reason that mental exercises must logically provide similar benefits for the mind. Enter “Sharpening the Saw.”

**Does your saw need sharpening?**

> Suppose you were to come upon someone in the woods working feverishly to saw down a tree. "What are you doing?" you ask. "Can't you see?" comes the impatient reply. "I'm sawing down this tree." "You look exhausted!" you exclaim. "How long have you been at it?" "Over five hours," he returns, "and I'm beat! This is hard work." "Well why don't you take a break for a few minutes and sharpen that saw?" you inquire. "I'm sure it would go a lot faster." "I don't have time to sharpen the saw," the man says emphatically. "I'm too busy sawing!"

(from Steven Covey's 7 Habits of Highly Effective People)

How many times have you or your analysts worked at a problem without a break and without a solution? Often a breakthrough comes in when someone else takes a look at what has been accomplished and views the effort from a different perspective. Sometime you or your analyst will leave the issue for a day or a weekend and when you return, the answer is staring you in the face and seems so logical you wonder how you could have missed it. It’s probably because you’ve allowed your “saw” to get dull.
How to sharpen your saw

How I suggest analytical students and practitioners sharpen their saw is through the use of logic exercises, such as Sudoku type puzzles. Initially they balked at these simple tools because they don’t experience immediate results and can’t imagine the potential value. A testimony to the success of integrating such exercises came to me years later when I have students and colleagues share that they are still using logic puzzles and feel like their staying on their game by using Sudoku like puzzles to keep themselves sharp. There are skill levels and levels of difficulty to challenge everyone from the brand new analyst to the most experienced supervisor.

I always recommend everyone begin with the simplest forms until they can complete them at speed. Then move onto the more challenging levels. As with any newly acquired physical regimen, this mental exercise of the mind should be done regularly for the first 21 days. Thereafter a maintenance level can be integrated into the daily routine. And just like preparing for a significant athletic or physical event, I believe the mind can be “ramped up” to attack a particularly complex problem or issue by working and completing difficult logic based exercises before or even during the analysis. By allowing the mind (muscle) to work in and on an area different from the target or focus objective for a short time, I believe analyst will gain cognitive strength and success.

So why Sudoku type puzzles instead of the traditional mental exercises; chess, checkers, mastermind, 3D Tic Tac Toe etc? One reason is because these types of logic exercise forces the user to conceptualize what is missing (deductive reasoning/process of elimination); while simultaneously theorize possible solutions (inductive reasoning). These theories and concepts are techniques which can be seamlessly applied to the area of analysis. It is recognized that in most instances the analyst will not be provided all the information needed to come to a 100% accurate representation of suspected criminal events; particularly when dealing with complex incidents of fraud, corruption, and organized crimes.

Through developing what I call “mental muscle memory”, by integrating Suduku and other logic type exercises the analyst can and will consciously and subconsciously apply their ability to look at an event or investigation logically and intuitively; then expand their perception to incorporate the “big picture”. The process can also allow them to look at events and incidents in a slightly different manner which may cause them to focus on specific areas and invariably note whether some thing is missing. Once the fact that some thing is “missing” they can apply a number of techniques to complete their process of elimination and identify the missing component(s). (from Eugene Matthews' The Association Matrix)

Another reason Sudoku type puzzles have proven themselves in some respects to be superior to traditional exercises is the fact that the puzzle can be completed at anytime and without the need for an opponent. But does it have to be Sudoku? Absolutely not. There are other similar logic puzzles called Samurai, Kakuro, Masyu, Hitori, Nurikabe and Hanidoku, each guaranteed to challenge the mind.

The Internet is also full of similar mind building challenges that can be even more challenging than the traditional paper based exercises. So - the lesson learned, or tip or trick worth sharing is that daily exercise of the body will improve your physical health and daily exercise of the mind through the regimen suggested will help any analyst and every investigator to continuously “sharpen the saw.”