



**SCHOOL for  
THINKTANKERS**

On Think Tanks



# BUILDING EFFECTIVE THINK TANK CULTURE

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## POLA ŽENA, POLA REFORMA

Bože mili, pogle MI6 ekspoziture,  
Na broju 6, u Jakšića Đure!  
Jedan poslanik tako podiže galamu,  
Dok je pio kafu u jutarnjem programu.

Ali, nisu to Britanci i nije služba,  
Već to je mala Sonjina družba,  
BG centar za bezbednosnu politiku,  
Najbolji balkanski tink-tenk za analitiku.  
I tu je Sonja za vreme svog mandata,  
Bila super-žena i prava tata-mata.

Trinaest dugih prošlo je leta,  
Otkad u CCVO ti ušeta,  
I sada odlaziš, ali ne plači,  
Ostaviš BCBP nikada jači.

Da nije bilo tvoje intuicije,  
Ne bi bilo ni prEUgovor koalicije,  
A zbog tvoje hrabrosti lavlje,  
Mora da se pazi na svako poglavlje.

Ali, od skoro, upitno je naše preživljavanje,  
Sve je jače sa Partijom sukobljavanje,  
Jer u Srbiji se događa državno zarobljavanje  
I od demokratije sve veće udaljavanje.

Sve iznad je istina i nije varanje,  
Na dokazima je zasnovano svako naše zagovaranje!  
A da bi došlo do raspetljavanja,  
Potrebno je još mnogo našeg domišljavanja.

Pred sam kraj, da bi ova pesma bila usekšena,  
Nastavi da budeš super-žena!  
Jer, možda nisi nosila uniformu,  
Ali si pionirka za bezbednosnu reformu.

Gde ti stade mi ćemo produžiti,  
Drugu fazu reforme sektora ćemo zaokružiti.  
Zajedničkim snagama protivu Diktatora,  
Mi na terenu, ti kao članica Upravnog odbora.

U Beogradu, 31. oktobra 2019.



### Sonja Stojanovic Gajic

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In activism since I was 16. I led a student organization and later worked for big IGO and in academia.

### 2006-2019 Director of Belgrade Centre for Security Policy (BCSP)

Mixed job description: management and programme

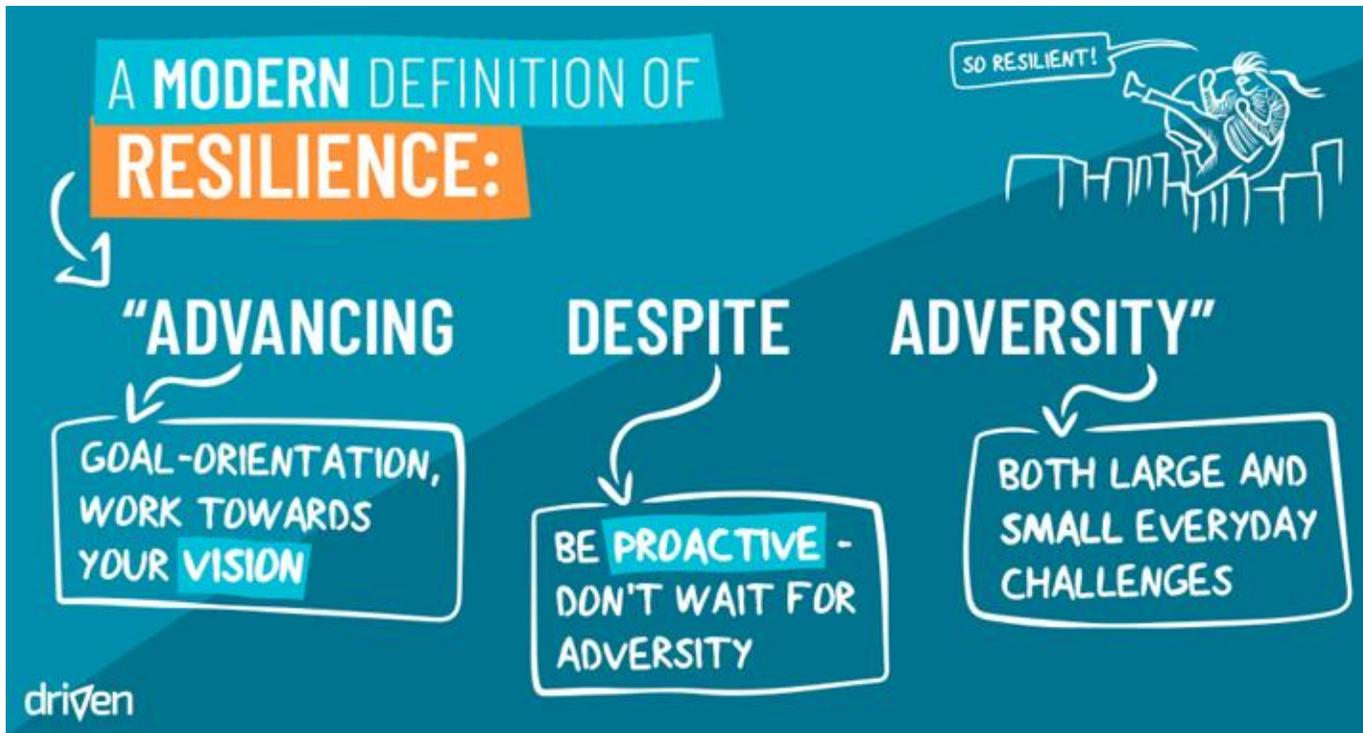
- **Self-educated manager** - learned by doing it and leading an organisation through change process
- **Set up networks and communities of practice** to resolve cross-national issues

**Consultant to CSOs and IGOs** in East Europe, Middle East and Latin America  
**Certified Analytic-Network Coach** and completed multi-year Training in Systems-Psychodynamic Consulting

**Research Fellow**, Centre for Advanced Studies, UniRI, Croatia

# Organizational Resilience

The greater the extent of internal vulnerabilities, an organization is the more at risk in increasingly hostile external environments.



SCHOOL for THINKTANKERS



# Draw a typical situation/activity/ place/object of your organisation

- Use visuals, not words
- It is not about drawing, but your experience of organisational culture.



# **CULTURE is a learned system of shared understanding**

*This is the way we do things here*

How should people behave?

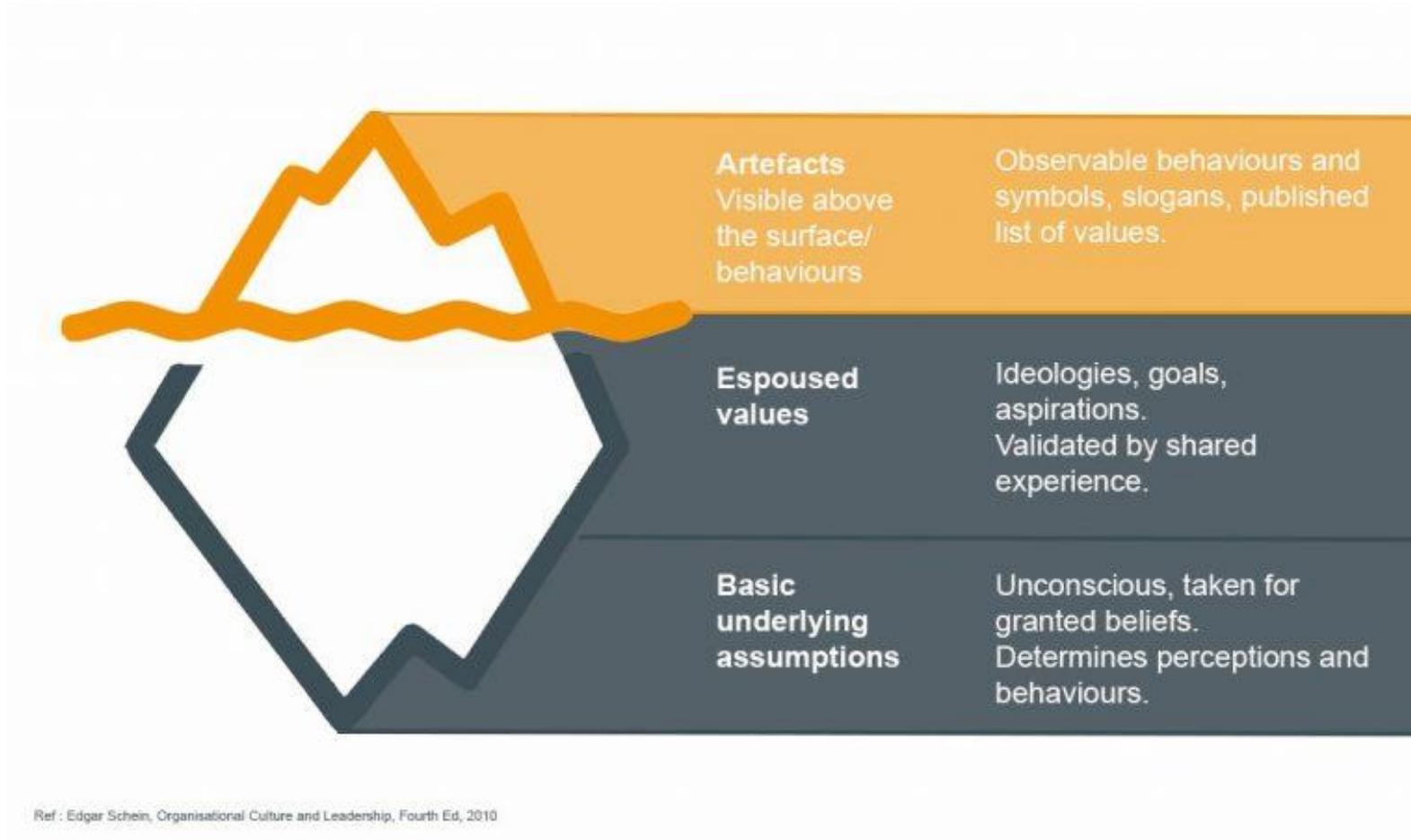
How are decisions made?

How work activities should be carried out?



Where would you start  
from to study  
organizational culture  
of think tanks?

# Culture



# Task: list the attributes and examples



CULTURE

EATS STRATEGY

FOR BREAKFAST

# Example of supported values - GOVERNANCE

- What are we making decisions about?
- What kinds of relationships are these structures supporting?
- Whose voices/engagement are included?
  - **A board or governing body** responsible for overarching decisions and the long-term vision (independent from management).
  - **Executive direction:** a competent manager at the centre of the organisation.
  - **Senior managers/decision makers** with oversight over three main aspects of the
  - **think tank's work:** research, communications and management.
  - Institutional structures **that bring people, teams and roles together**

Decisions	Board	Management with the Board	Management
<b>STRATEGY</b>			
Mission	X		
Strategic planning	X		
Annual plan	X		
Implementation of annual plan			X
Evaluation of strategic plan	X		
Plans for major cooperation, partnerships	X		
<b>PROGRAMS</b>			
Introduction of new programmes and services	X		
Policy for grant-making		X	
Donations		X	
Programmes evaluation		X	
<b>MANAGEMENT</b>			
Structure and size of Board	X		
Selection of Board members	X		
Selection of external audit	X		
Appointment of internal audit/control		X	
<b>HUMAN RESOURCES</b>			
Management structure	X		
HR policies	X		
Recruitment and employment			X
Compensation policy		X	
Career development plans		X	
<b>FUNDRAISING</b>			
Approval of fundraising plan	X		
Setting annual targets		X	
Gift/donation policy	X		
Decisions on receiving grants		X	
Capital gift/investment	X		
<b>OUTREACH</b>			
Logo/change of image	X		
Communications for specific initiatives			X
Contracting advertising agencies			X
<b>LAW - LEGAL MATTERS</b>			
Statute	X		
Initiating legal procedure	X		
Evaluation of legal service			X
Contracting procedure	X		
<b>FINANCE</b>			
Financial targets		X	
Approval of operating budget	X		
Capital spending	X		
Costs over 1000€ outside of budget		X	
Investment policy and targets	X		
Credits	X		
Reporting on financial work		X	
Report on spending		X	
Financial control		X	
Financial audit		X	
Selling property or transferring	X		

# The structure can be established in flat organisations vs. 'we are family' myth

Agreements and clarity and transparency

- **clarity of roles and division of responsibilities** and the right to change
- **lines of responsibility** (who is responsible for what...), and where is the autonomy
- **ways of coordination way of decision-making** - democracy within the organization

Western, S., 2017. Where's **Daddy**? Integrating the Paternal and Maternal Stance to Deliver Non-authoritarian Leadership Dynamics, 17(2) .



## Not ideal, but good enough leader

*I always say that think-tank Directors are doomed to fail, because the job description is so wide. How can you be the world's best researcher, best communicator, best fund-raiser, best leader of change, and best manager, all at once? Of course, you can't.*

Simon Maxwell, former director of the Overseas Development Institute.

ORGANISATIONAL FORMS

Networked Leadership

(especially in the context of hybrid work)

<https://www.ecoleadershipinstitute.org/what-is-eco-leadership>

**Controller Leadership**

Efficiency & Productivity



Hierarchy

**Messiah Leadership**

Vision & Culture

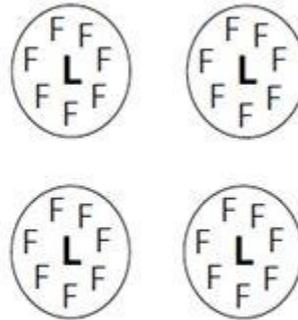
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Leader & Flat Structure

**Therapist Leadership**

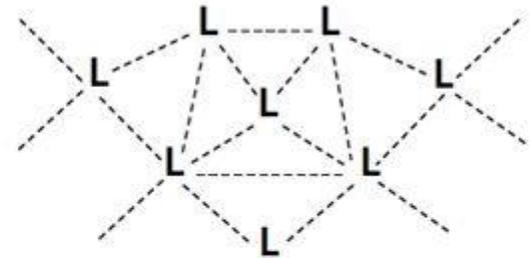
Relationships & Motivation



Team Leadership

**Eco Leadership**

Connectivity & Ethics



Distributed & Network Leadership

# What keeps directors awake at night?



# Internal relations

HR relationships within (the team – research role)

- HR – **profile of the think tankers** (young graduates vs. established individuals)
- **Career opportunities** (professional development) – what is career progress? Compensation and employment policy. Where do people go afterwards?
- Management of non-permanent or volunteer staff
- Development of team leaders and middle management: **How to transition from technical ‘expert’ position to the management role?**
- In unstable context - how to protect staff from **external threats and burn out**

# The nightmare



# Team Relationships

- **Status and purpose** - recognition of value, pride and awareness of power and privilege in the team
  - **Certainty** - predictability through routines, boundaries and thinking about the future
  - **Autonomy** - possibility of choice, voice and control
  - **Connection** - social connections give us a sense of security
  - **Fair relations** - fairness within the organization
- **Leading by example** - 75%
  - **Space for conflicts**
  - **Room for mistakes**
  - **Pride and purpose**
  - **Connection**

Practices and the participation in the communities of practice (CoPs) change more than other instruments.

But the consistent use of mix of approached is necessary!

# Fuck-up Nights

**What?** a global movement where people share stories of professional failure.

<https://en.fuckupnights.com>

**Why?** To create a culture shift around failure and enable a mindset of well-being and innovation. Fuck-Up Nights are a safe space for sharing vulnerabilities and laughs and learning within the community.

**How?**

- Few introductory speakers kick off the event with sharing their stories of failure/challenges during their career.
- Everyone present can ask follow-up questions to the presenters.
- *The Open Mic* for volunteers after initial stories.

# How to manage external risks?

1. let's reduce external uncertainty through **joint reflection**
  - why we do what we do and
  - what we won't do during marathon stride
  - **Foresight - Anticipating future scenarios** instead of constantly reacting
  - linking with important partners
2. **Plan B** - getting ready to respond to risks and how to respond
3. trauma prevention and recovery support - support groups





How would you  
introduce change into  
organisational culture?

# Practical Work

1. Group 1: How would you **onboard** - introduce interns or newly hired staff to the organisational culture?
1. Group 2: How to create and maintain organisational culture in **remote work**?
1. **Change Management**: How to change the practice of too many long meetings in the organisation?

# Challenge 1: Onboarding for new staff - scaling up

The think tank X was founded by a tight-knit group of seasoned researchers, all of whom have worked together for years. Their bond is rooted in shared activist experiences, intellectual passion, and a collective vision for advancing knowledge. As a small organization, the team is close-knit and informal, often blurring the lines between professional roles and personal friendships. The culture is highly collaborative, but also fast-paced.

Despite its impressive reputation for producing high-quality research, X faces a significant problem: difficulty in retaining new, younger staff members. The founding team's frustration with the new hires' lack of commitment leads to even less effort in mentoring and guiding them. At the same time, the new hires' confusion and discomfort with the unstructured environment leads to dissatisfaction and eventual departure.

## Challenge 2: Remote Work

**Context:** A youth think tank with members from various countries is operating remotely, and its staff consists of students based on different continents. The challenge lies in creating a shared sense of organizational culture and coherence among a diverse, geographically dispersed group with no consistent in-person interactions.

**Problem:** The virtual environment makes it difficult to establish common values, expectations, and a unified approach to work. Members come from varied educational backgrounds, cultures, and time zones, leading to miscommunications, feelings of isolation, and inconsistent levels of engagement. Despite the shared goal of policy advocacy, there's a lack of shared organizational identity.

## Challenge 3: Too many meetings

The think tank's senior leadership has noticed that staff, particularly research and advocacy teams, are **overburdened with internal and external meetings**, leading to burnout and a decline in overall productivity.

The organization's culture values face-to-face interaction (even if virtual), and there's an unspoken expectation that attending meetings is essential to being seen as a 'dedicated' employee.

Some senior staff members are reluctant to reduce the number of meetings, fearing loss of control or communication breakdown.

Different teams or departments often hold simultaneous meetings, which leads to scheduling conflicts and further reduces available working hours.

The constant pressure to attend meetings—some outside of working hours due to time zone differences—has led to an unsustainable work-life balance. Staff members feel overwhelmed and are finding it increasingly difficult to balance work with personal life.

# Running a think tank in a changing Europe

[https://open.spotify.com/episode/5TSeB3eRTC4Ap98AjGwDU5?si=smIB5NvAQWiFZANabcxi\\_A](https://open.spotify.com/episode/5TSeB3eRTC4Ap98AjGwDU5?si=smIB5NvAQWiFZANabcxi_A)



**tt**  
talks

Running a think tank in a changing Europe: Adapting to new realities in the Western Balkans  
(Bonus Content)

  
**Senja Stojanovic-Gajic**  
Former director of the Belgrade Centre for Security Policy

  
**Goran Buldioski**  
Senior Fellow at the Hertie School of Governance in Berlin

  
**Enrique Mendizabal**  
Founder & Director  
GTT

# Useful resources on leadership

Think Tank Leadership: Functions and Challenges of Executive Directors

[https://onthinktanks.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/OTT\\_WP9\\_Think-Tank-LeadershipFINAL.pdf](https://onthinktanks.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/OTT_WP9_Think-Tank-LeadershipFINAL.pdf)

Ajoy Data on networked leadership

- <https://onthinktanks.org/articles/what-shapes-the-authority-and-power-of-leaders-and-their-followers/>
- <https://onthinktanks.org/articles/in-charge-but-not-in-control-lessons-from-leading-teams-in-a-networked-world/>

Enrique Mendizabal <https://onthinktanks.org/articles/what-keeps-think-tank-directors-up-at-night-reflections-on-funding-staffing-governance-communications-and-me/>

Think Tank Director Profiles and how to replace them

<https://onthinktanks.org/articles/directors-profiles-and-how-to-replace-them/>

Why pay attention to management

<https://onthinktanks.org/articles/why-pay-attention-to-management-the-managing-think-tanks-series/>

# Stay in touch

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