Why the management style of a Danish hearing-aid maker may hold the key to stopping Bin Laden

James Meek on the al-Qaida network's debt to 'spaghetti organisation'

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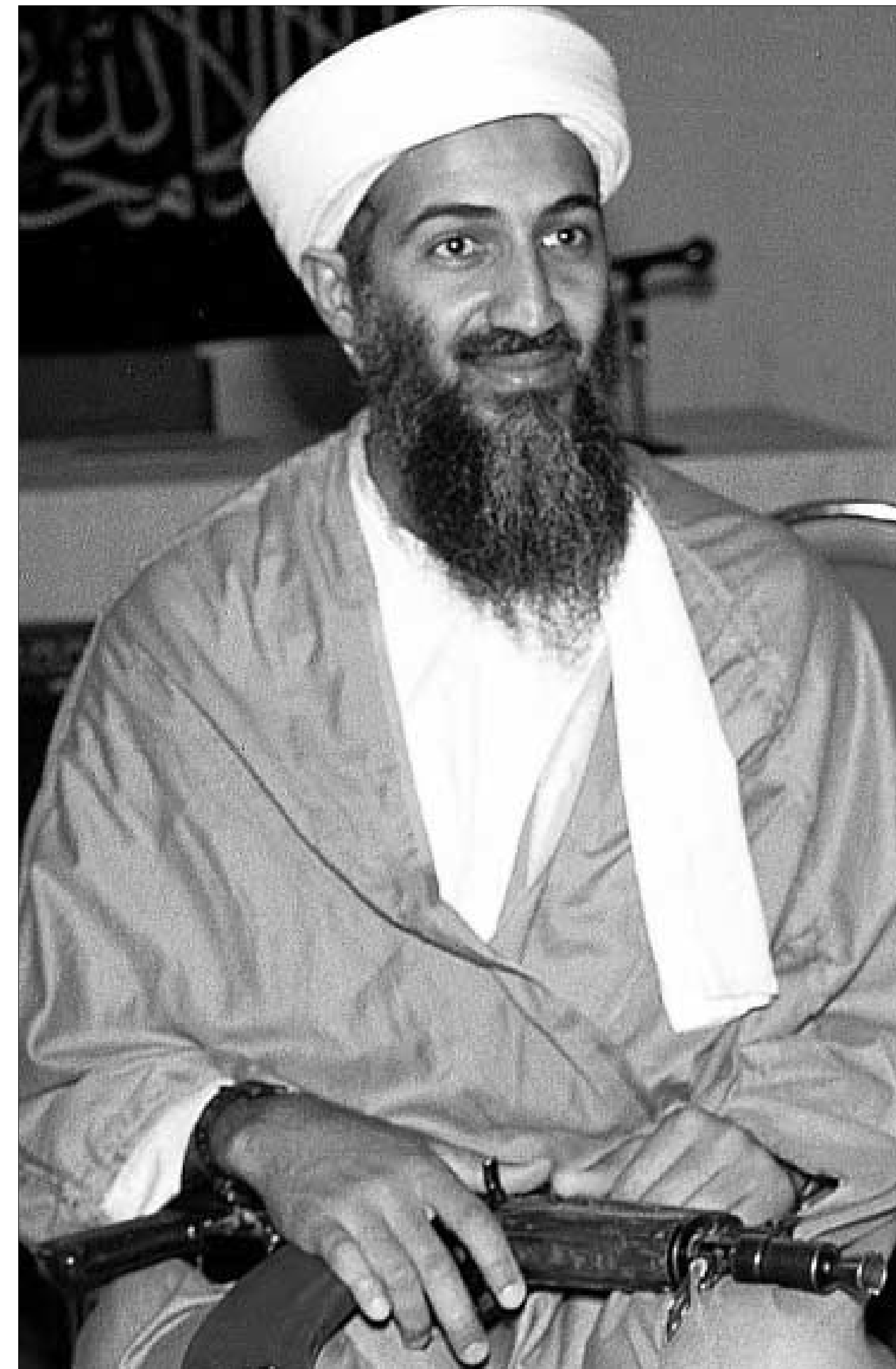

Lars Kolind . . . changed the way his organisation was run in 1990, abolishing hierarchy and job titles and allowing staff to choose their own projects. Could there be a parallel with Bin Laden's al-Qaida?

On April 18 1990, employees of Oticon, a large Danish manufacturer of hearing aids, received a startling memo from their new boss, Lars Kolind. The memo, headed Think the Unthinkable, announced the beginning of a new style of management called "the spaghetti organisation".

All formal job titles were scrapped. No employee had a desk or office of their own, or a role except one they chose for themselves from a list of projects on a bulletin board. Staff could take on as many different projects as they wanted, and were expected to pick up new skills along the way. Projects were not managed in the traditional way – leaders were mere coordinators, and the team took a project through from start to finish by itself.

Kolind's radical attempt to break free from the traditional shape of a big western organisation has generated reams of analysis in the esoteric world of management theory. Some even say he was inspired by the international scouting movement, which, one theorist wrote with great seriousness, organised its jamborees "not as a result of detailed planning and management, but rather as an emergent result of a strong and shared set of values that served to orchestrate and coordinate decentralised initiatives".

It was too much. Spaghetti management served Oticon well, but most of its extreme elements have been quietly dropped. So it is with western management fads: the dream of creating a lean, loose, decentralised, highly-motivated organisation fades as the difficulty of weaning western bureaucracies, public and private, off their rituals and hierarchies becomes apparent.

Could it be that in the most hideous, unexpected way, a man has realised this dream for a company whose business is mass murder? Beyond the horror of the threat which Osama Bin Laden and al-Qaida pose to human life is a threat, at the deepest mental level, to the worldview of the western organisations, the government agencies, which are tasked with bringing them to justice: that a terrorist, of all people, has found a way to mingle the spontaneity of chaos with the efficiency of precise planning in a way that western hierarchies are incapable of understanding.

The amorphousness of al-Qaida not only makes it difficult to hunt down its members and pin blame on individuals; it also means it does not necessarily have the same form from day to day, a clear beginning or end. "There's talk in management theory these days about working on the edge of chaos," says Julian Birkinshaw, of the London Business School. "Complete chaos is just a disaster. If you have too much hierarchy, the world becomes too rich. However, there's some sort of balance, at the edge of chaos, where you have enough structure to keep control of what's going on, but individuals and groups self-organise spontaneously. 'Self-organising systems' – we borrowed that term from complexity science."

If Seymour Hersh, the well-connected US writer on intelligence affairs, is to be believed, the two biggest western organisations on Bin Laden's trail, the FBI and the CIA, are sticking to the two traditional, if diametrically opposed, western views of clandestine enemies.

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In a recent article in the New Yorker, Hersh wrote that the FBI sees the September 11 attack as the work of an ad-hoc team who got lucky – amateurs, in effect, albeit suicidal amateurs. "These guys look like a pick-up basketball team," one FBI investigator told him. In contrast, the CIA sees the perpetrators as part of a larger, hierarchical group of career terrorists, carefully organised into cells, who launched their mission only after patient years of training and preparation.

There is another possibility, which falls between the two: that there is, indeed, a loose network of committed, lifelong terrorists, but that what they receive from Bin Laden and associates is less specific orders and training than a clear, simple ideology, which they are expected to go out into the world and put into practice on their own. Like doctors, trained and sent out with the ideology of healing the sick and earning a living, the terrorists go forth with the ideology of self-sacrifice and killing Americans.

It is a parallel which the cult management guru Bill Ouchi, who came to fame in the 1980s with his Theory Z – a synthesis of Japanese and American management practice – has been brooding over since September 11. "The basic method of guaranteeing control over distant employees or members is in some way similar to the training of doctors, lawyers, accountants, and other professionals," he says. "They are deeply socialised into the values of their profession, are then put through an apprenticeship during which they must exhibit both technical skill and acceptance of the ideology, and then are set free to operate on their own. Indeed, we define a profession precisely by the consistency with which each member of that profession carries out their tasks without hierarchical supervision."

Ouchi says that the cultural background of the terrorists is essential to understanding the nature of their organisation. "We should be anything but surprised to learn that terrorists who come from traditional societies are able to operate largely without visible, bureaucratic forms of organisation.The bureaucratic solution is to be found only in modern societies, which these clearly are not.

"In traditional societies, authority is based on religious or on other traditional forms of legitimacy. People do not readily accept the notion that one ought to report to work and take orders from a person who is neither superior by family status nor a religious person of superior rank. Indeed, it is not entirely strange to reject the idea that taking orders from strangers is a proper way to live."

The recent British government report on Bin Laden and al-Qaida's responsibility for the September 11 attacks makes a valiant attempt to portray al-Qaida as an all-embracing, powerful, tightly-knit organisation, evil's prime contractor.

But while the report succeeds in drawing links between Bin Laden and the September 11 attacks, underlines the fact that the atrocities are exactly in line with Bin Laden's wishes, and indicates he knew they were about to happen, it sheds little light on the real nature of the ties that bind al-Qaida members and associates to each other. The picture it paints is an implausibly neat one of a terrorist chairman, with a terrorist board, the shura, and terrorist vice-presidents for military, media, financial and religious issues; of a company specialising in narcotics and murder, with a huge staff, skilled accountants and fixed assets around the world – a firm which recently "merged" (as the report puts it) with Egypt's Islamic Jihad.

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It may be true. There is evidence that al-Qaida finance is available for bad causes, and that money left over from the September 11 preparations was scrupulously returned to the Bin Laden paymaster Sheikh Saeed before the day of slaughter. Or it may be wishful thinking – a desire to see in al-Qaida the kind of organisation which is defined enough to be liquidated.

Professor Paul Rogers of Bradford University, a specialist in terrorism, says: "All the indications are that it isn't a hierarchical group at all. Bin Laden is quite significant but certainly not the dominant one. It's almost a kind of federation of terrorist networks, all with one very broad aim. If you have that I think you begin to see how a few people will operate to a great extent on their own, with fairly loose coordination. That doesn't mean the leadership group wouldn't be aware of forthcoming events."

Only by facing up to the deep source of new recruits, and future terrorist leaders, can western governments feel safe, he argues. But there is a reluctance to confront the sources of anger, particularly American support for the corrupt, autocratic oil regimes of the Gulf. "If the coalition succeeds in its aims, and manages to get rid of the whole Bin Laden operation, it will be perhaps three years before the next similar group rears its head," Rogers says.

Britain may be out of step in its focus on Bin Laden. There are signs that the Bush administration is beginning to accept the absurdity of characterising him as the CEO of Terrorism Incorporated, rather than, say, the dean of a noted terrorism faculty. This is realism, and benign realism, if it means a post-Bin Laden focus on the grievances which generate new missionaries of of death. But not if it means the US is consenting to enter into a new cold war, where it accepts the inevitability of terrorist group after terrorist group.

That was what Donald Rumsfeld, the US defence secretary, seemed to promise recently. "If [Bin Laden] were gone, the problem would remain," he said. "There are any number of lieutenants in the Al Qaida organisation and there are any number of other terrorist networks that exist, all of which are a danger to free people." His words seemed to hold out a distinctly dispiriting prospect: an infinite war, against an invisible enemy.