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Building Professional and Personal Relationships in Counterinsurgency Environments

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A recent *Washington Post* article describes a meeting between a U.S. Army Captain and an Afghan village elder in Afghanistan that failed badly. The meeting could have been in Iraq, Lebanon, or Somalia. The result was largely predetermined before the first words were spoken. The Afghan elder asks the Captain why he is coming to speak at that time having not attended any of the local Shura (elders' meetings) in months. The captain replies that the meetings are useless, and that they only talk about goats. Not surprisingly, the meeting goes badly from there. This experience is depressingly familiar to many who have served in Afghanistan and Iraq. After nearly a decade of war in traditional Muslim societies, many of our soldiers, diplomats, and aid workers simply cannot develop the long term professional relationships of mutual confidence. In these societies all professional relationships are also personal as well, and that does require building an atmosphere of mutual confidence.

I use the term mutual confidence, because trust is too strong a word to use in defining many of these relationships. Mutual confidence calls for mutual respect and a two way expectation of promises kept. Real trust is a much more special thing, and most often takes longer to build than the usual seven to twelve month in-country tour. Too many Americans take the byzantine patterns of relationships in traditional Muslim societies personally. We are not in these counterinsurgency situations to gratify our personal egos.

Every culture and region is slightly different; Iraq is not Afghanistan and Lebanon is different than both. After a quarter of a century dealing off and on with Muslim societies built on largely tribal cultures, I've probably made every mistake in the book, but I've found some things that I think hold true across the board.

Remember where you are

Cultural norms in both Iraq and Afghanistan have their roots in nomadic and/or pastoral tribal and cultural norms that predate both Christ and Mohammad. Many behaviors are hard wired into even the most sophisticated of urban politicians and bureaucrats. When you think about it, so are our norms. Many of the basics of western behavior have near- primordial origins. Our military customs and courtesies would be largely familiar to army of the Roman Republic, and many of the behaviors taught at the Foreign Service Institute date from the Peace of Westphalia that ended the Thirty Years War. We are what we have been. Your negotiating partners are not going to change their basic genetic make up any more than you are. Live with it.

Much of what you think you know about the local culture may be wrong

In the near decade that we have been at war in Iraq and Afghanistan, the populations of both countries have adapted to us in ways that are subtle. In many ways they have adapted to us more quickly than we have to them. Consequently, some of the things that you learned in cultural awareness classes are no longer valid in many situations. This is more the case in dealing with people who interact with Americans on a fairly frequent basis than in areas that have seen little contact with U.S. forces or personnel.

Most of us have been taught not to expect much from a first meeting with people in Muslim countries. We are often told to expect them to be “get acquainted” sessions punctuated by polite questions about family and background. This was certainly the case with my experiences as a UN Observer in Lebanon, Gaza, Egypt, and Jordan as well as in assignments in Somalia and Bangladesh. It was also true in Iraq and Afghanistan early in the war. However, I was surprised in my first meeting with an Iraqi public official during my most recent tour. She met my polite inquiries about her family with a brusque request to get to the point of the meeting. I found this happening more often than not in the new Iraq.

Although this was the case with many Iraqi civilian and military officials, I found this to be less true in rural areas with relatively infrequent contact with Americans; in those areas, the old norms still applied. My rule of thumb was to take it slow until I got to know the person. If my Iraqi contact wanted to move faster than I was going, he would usually let me know.

Plan on being used

Americans are afraid of being used in relationships with the locals. To this, I say;” What do you think you are there for?” If you are not useful, the locals won’t want anything to do with you. You are going to want something out of the relationship and your counterpart will expect something in return.

In tribal, agrarian societies people see negotiation as a zero sum gain. They expect there to be overt winners and losers in any hard negotiation process and they want to be the winner in things that they deem to be important. They will graciously deign to make sacrifices for you in areas that they don’t consider to be important. Your job is to be a “good loser” in giving up certain concessions in areas important to them even if what you are giving up is not really important to you, but it is usually a good idea to let them feel the pain that you yourself do not really feel in “losing”.

Know what you want from a relationship; evaluate the usefulness as you go

The corollary to the above is that you need to have a firm plan of what you want from any relationship in your professional dealings with host nation personnel. I never failed to be appalled by the number of seemingly aimless meetings that some of my colleagues engaged in. It was as if number of meetings attended was some kind of a perverse measure of effectiveness. You need to evaluate whether or not a relationship is going someplace or not to determine how

much effort you want to put into it. This is the other side of the usefulness equation. You will need to meet with some officials, local elders, or sheikhs as part of your job whether they are useful or not. After a few meetings you and your cultural advisor should be able to determine whether the relationship will be useful and merits close cultivation or if it can be placed in the “must do occasionally” box. Time is your most valuable commodity.

I found a good rule of thumb to be the “three strike” approach. If an individual made a firm promise to deliver something three times, and failed he went into the second string relationship box.

Having said that, you must know what you want from a relationship. Before you set up a meeting you should have a conversation with your interpreter and your cultural advisor (if you have one) regarding the desired outcome. After any meeting, you should have a debriefing session to determine if the objective was met, and if not, what the next step should be. If you cannot articulate what you want to come out of a meeting, you need to ask yourself why you are having it. Even a get acquainted meeting should lay the groundwork for the next one. In the case of meetings that you have to go to because you were directed to, you should have some policy points that you want to spread to the local community. In Iraq and Afghanistan, these points will get out if repeated to a number of individuals often enough.

Keep promises; never make a promise that you do not intend to keep or a threat that you are not capable of carrying out

Americans tend to make promises lightly, often as a way of disengaging from an uncomfortable situation. This is the “I’ll call you tomorrow” syndrome. In pastoral tribal cultures promises and threats are near sacred; don’t make them lightly.

An acquaintance of mine in the development community in Iraq became infamous for making promises that she was unsure or unable of keeping. She quickly lost all credibility with the locals and became a liability to her organization.

Any answer to a request, no matter how many caveats you put on it; such as “I can’t make any promises; but I will look into it” will be taken as a promise. The best fall back answer is “no” if you think it is not doable. If you really do intend to look into a matter or think you can do something about the issue, “inshallah (if God wills it) will work.

Show results

Once you have determined what your local partners need and want, you have to show results. The traditional main advantage of having the Americans on one’s side in a war is that we have a reputation for producing results and doing so fairly quickly. This reputation has become somewhat tarnished in Iraq and Afghanistan when we have often taken a long-term developmental approach, rather than a short term results oriented reconstruction approach. Short term results oriented approaches are more appropriate to building immediate confidence in the population. You are not Mother Theresa; you are there to win a war. As one Afghan friend

recently told me, “you Americans put a man on the moon in eight years, but after eight years you can’t light up Kandahar; no wonder you are losing.”

This discontinuity between long-term development and short term actions taken to win the counterinsurgency fight was highlighted in a recent story in the *Washington Post* about the plan to bring electricity to Kandahar. The military wants to bring in generators as a short term fix to show some progress that will follow the inevitable unpleasantness of kicking the armed Taliban elements out of the city. The U.S. Agency for International Development would prefer to take the long term approach fixing a major dam and rebuilding the electrical grid. This would make my friend’s question even more operative. In counterinsurgency environments, the fence sitters who are your real target audience will be asking, “What have you done for me today?” You need to have an answer.

Group meetings are a an important part of relationship building, but set rules for your participation

Let’s return to a minute to our captain who didn’t attend the Shura meetings discussed at the beginning of this piece. He was correct in assessing that the Shura meetings as structured were probably a waste of his time. Where he missed an opportunity, was in failing to set rules for his participation. He would have been better off if he had told them that meetings that merely centered on damage claims would be better handled by a subordinate’s participation. As the senior American present, he should have and could have told them that if they desired his presence they should be prepared to discuss important issues of relevance to the entire community. As his hosts, they would have had a duty to pay attention to his wishes.

I made it a habit to ask for an agenda in advance of any regularly scheduled group meeting before agreeing to attend. I would entertain complaints about American wrongdoing if it appeared to have some basis in fact or if my presence would counteract a rumor or insurgent disinformation, but I always requested that there be a positive and actionable agenda item on the schedule and I generally asked that the appropriate Iraqi ministry or local government representative who had cognizance over the item to be discussed be invited as well. The object was to seek Iraqi solutions first and then to fill in with American help if needed. The object was to make it their problem to solve, and then ask where we could help.

Expect a degree of corruption, be delighted if it is less than you expected, but don’t let it ruin a relationship

For thousands of years governments in what are now Iraq and Afghanistan have been paying public officials low wages - expecting them to make up the difference between that and a living wage with a certain amount of baksheesh (bribes). We will not likely break up this tradition in the short time that we have left in either county. If you break relations with every public official you suspect of some degree of corruption, you will have a very lonely tour. As with everything else in that area of the world, you are advised not to take things personally. If the individual’s conduct is so egregious that it affects your mission, handle it in a professional manner. Inform the individual that you have heard some unfortunate rumors about his conduct and that if the matter is brought to your official attention, you may be forced to break off contact. If this does

not modify his behavior, you have the option of notifying his superior; do not be surprised if this does not work. The nuclear option is to break off relations for a while. If dealing with you is important to him, he will seek an accommodation. If not, you have freed up your schedule to do more useful things.

Inshallah can mean no, I hope so, or maybe

Inshallah (If God wills it) is the most useful phrase in the Muslim world. It can mean anything you want it to and can be interpreted that way after the fact. Islam is a deterministic religion; if God doesn't will it, it ain't gonna happen. This can cover a lot of sins, and frequently does. Most Muslims will understand that if they make a direct request for you to do something and you answer with Inshallah, it probably means no. If you say inshallah to a request and then actually come through with a positive outcome, you will be a hero, but if things do not turn out: you won't be a goat. It is a polite way of saying no, but sometimes a flat no with an explanation of why you cannot or will not undertake something is a more direct acknowledgment of your intentions. However, that may draw some renewed pleading. Inshallah is a pretty final answer. Few Muslims want to be caught second guessing God.

Life is tough, but it is tougher when you are stupid

About the only way to learn anything well is to do it, but learning from the mistakes of others can help you to avoid the worst pratfalls of finding one's way in unfamiliar situations. In that, I hope this piece is useful. You will make mistakes in any foreign culture; admit to them and learn. The only unforgivable mistake is not to try at all. No war has ever been won on a forward operating base.

The author recently finished a tour with the State Department as the Senior Governance Advisor with an embedded Provincial Reconstruction Team in Iraq.

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