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## The Hidden Engagement: Interpreters

Don Moss

*Author's Note: This article represents the second in a series of papers (see Engaging Afghans: KLE Keys to Success) addressed to units and individuals involved in direct engagement with the people of Afghanistan. The intent is to provide advice and "lessons learned" based on first-hand experience in order to deepen the Afghan-ISAF partnership through relationships.*

In Afghanistan, there is a growing focus on the importance of partnering with Afghan institutions and building their capacity through broad, meaningful engagement. However, your unit's efforts to positively engage with local tribes, religious, military and government figures, you may be overlooking a critical engagement much closer to home: your own interpreters.

With the arrival of thousands of additional troops in Afghanistan this year, the need for interpreters or Host Nation Linguists (HNLs) will also skyrocket. Even now, there are upwards



of 5,000 men and women working for the primary HNL employer, Mission Essential Personnel, alone. Highly intelligent (often speaking 3-4 languages), hard-working and cultural experts, HNLs represent a valuable asset and learning conduit. Often, the HNLs your unit inherits have years of experience dealing in the local area and with personalities your team will encounter. This enables them to provide valuable insight long after your predecessors depart, usually after far too little turnover. That said, below are some suggestions for engaging with your HNLs and making it a productive, long-term relationship that will pave the way for all others:

*A good interpreter paves the way for a good engagement.*  
TSgt Cheney (Civil Engineer) and "Chuck" assess a local bank in Gardez.

**Respect them:** Often interpreters are treated as tools vs. people. Summoned to meetings, disregarded after, and often treated as a necessity vs. a personality, the potential for a rift between you and your HNL's is real. They face the same risk of death or injury as you do during missions and do so unarmed. Additionally, they, and their families are often singled out for

attacks due to their cooperation with and support of ISAF and the Afghan government. Do your best to include them in unit events and treat them appropriately.

Some interpreters (CAT II and above) are cleared for SECRET level material and beyond. Use this to the benefit of your mission. Query them on cultural issues that could affect your mission or result from it. You are aware by now that how you interact with the local populace directly affects how Afghans view you and ISAF as a whole. This is no different when it comes to your interaction with HNLs. If these men and women, who interact more with ISAF than any local leader, aren't treated well by the units they work for, what impression of ISAF will they give to their families and friends? The respect you show or don't show them will be noticed, passed on and remembered. Realize, recognize, and understand they are risking their lives and those of their families, not just for a paycheck but with the hope that Afghanistan can become a better, stronger, safer country for them and their families.



*Make the most of your interpreter's area expertise.*  
Capt Stanford (CA) and "Paul" work with a local orphanage official.

***HNLs have a story:*** Interpreters sometimes have been working with ISAF for years, either in the same province or throughout the country. Our team had a 25 year old interpreter who fought with Marines in Helmand Province and was at the time convoying through some of the most kinetic areas in RC-East. He had a black belt, a smile on his face, and a wealth of experience to offer. Take the time to share chai with your interpreters and hear their back-stories. These folks living on your FOB/COP are rich insights into Afghan history, more valuable than any book in some cases. Listen to their opinions and advice, especially concerning cultural issues. They've experienced a lot and often can be an important guide to the complex relationships between the various tribes and personalities of your province.

When they're given the opportunity to visit their families or nearby cities such as Kabul, talk to them upon their return and take the "pulse" of the local community. Do their families and friends feel Afghanistan is improving? Who has the initiative, the insurgency or GIRoA and ISAF? What recent events have made an impact on their thinking and how? The opportunity for peeks into the Afghan mindset should not be wasted.

***Let them teach you:*** Few in the military can attend intensive language training prior to deployment. For most units, language training normally consists of a few basic phrases that are usually quickly forgotten. Remember, you have a number of potential language instructors right on your base. During your unit's downtime, ask your HNLs to teach you and your team phrases in the provincial language. This shouldn't be limited to those who usually do direct engagements such as the Commander or Civil Affairs. Almost every member of your unit has the opportunity to speak at some time to a local national. The impact of using a few phrases in the local language can't be overstated. Even small, positive engagements count in the big picture.

**Help them improve and provide feedback:** While we would like all of our interpreters to be instantly savvy in every language and dialect we might encounter, many arrive with limited experience. This leads to a tendency to rely on “go to” guys; those who are better than the rest from the outset. This is understandable but in the long run self-defeating. Everyone’s skills improve with practice, especially language skills. Understand this and for some engagements, bring less adept HNLs so they can experience the local dialect and improve. Over time, this will result in your unit having several above par linguists vs. a few sharpshooters alone. Expand your resources, don’t limit them.

Part of improving your interpreter corps includes providing feedback to them at least once a quarter if possible (remember, your time is limited) and more often if necessary. Address their strengths as well as areas for improvement, and be sensitive to the Afghan culture (and Pashtunwali if appropriate). Try to make it constructive for their benefit and yours. Conduct feedback privately. Criticizing an HNL in front of your unit and/or his peers serves little purpose, and will likely do more harm than good. Marginalizing an interpreter because his dialect isn’t great but neglecting to explain why they’ve been sidelined doesn’t allow opportunity for improvement, and ultimately won’t help your unit or further your mission.

**Reward your HNLs:** As mentioned previously, many interpreters work years for ISAF. After a period of time, most will likely request transfers to a specific area to be closer to their families or visas to the United States. If your interpreters have served admirably for a few years, start the paperwork for them, and follow through. Don’t let them fall through the cracks rotation after rotation, always hoping the next unit will be the one to help them. Your unit should certainly recognize all of your HNLs upon departure with certificates and/or in some cases, letters of recommendations. Afghans cherish these and use them as resume builders when applying for



**Treat your interpreters as part of your team**

Capt Moss (S2) and “Amiri” post-mission in Gerda Serai, Paktya.

other jobs. Our unit also recognized HNLs who were involved in contact with the enemy. Interpreters don’t qualify for a Combat Action Badge but a testament to duty under fire is certainly appropriate and recognizes them for putting their life on the line in service of their country.

**Final thoughts:** There are those with less positive sentiments about HNLs, generally fueled by the rare event such as that of an interpreter killing two soldiers in Wardak Province in January of this year. This, coupled with rumors of the insurgency’s desire to masquerade as HNLs for the purpose of spying or executing

attacks, lead to a lack of trust for some. Understand these stories are rare and the rumors often untrue. As we have asked the public not to vilify the entire US military for acts such as the

crimes of a few at Abu Gharib, Iraq, don't preclude a strong unit/interpreter relationship based on unfounded worries.

The importance of ISAF engagement with the Afghan populace can't be overstated. This relationship is often facilitated through the efforts of Host Nation Linguists. By appreciating them, their capabilities, and their critical role in the ISAF mission, you and your unit can take another step toward success.

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### **Suggested readings:**

Afghanistan: Maladies of Interpreters by Joshua Foust  
<http://www.corpwatch.org/article.php?id=15453>

Unfit Interpreters, also by Joshua Foust  
<http://www.registan.net/index.php/2009/07/23/unfit-interpreters/>

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