



Motivational Interviewing: Improving Combat Advising to Strengthen Partnering with Afghan National Security Forces

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“...Partnering is how we operate.”¹

Standing up a professional Afghan National Security Force (ANSF) is central to establishing a secure and more stable Afghan nation,^{2,3,4} and combat advising, as provided by US and coalition forces, is foundational to establishing a strong partnership with our ANSF brethren. Effective partnering, in turn, is critical to developing a capable and enduring ANSF.⁵ Given historical and evolving challenges and the contemporary importance of combat advising across US military operations, continuing efforts are necessary for further strengthening and preparing combat advisors to advise, coach, mentor, teach and partner with host nation security forces most recently in Afghanistan.^{6,7,8}

It is well understood that a strong partnership between combat advisors and their host nation security forces advisee is indispensable to supporting the ANSF's readiness, willingness and ability to accomplish their security mission.^{9,10,11} During the U.S. Army Foreign Security Forces (FSF) Combat Advisor Course and through the literature, advisors assigned to Afghanistan are told anecdotally that establishing an effective partnership depends on a number of essential elements such as developing rapport and respect, building trust, sharpening skills of persuasion, exercising patience, effecting empowerment, learning some Dari or Pashtu, and

¹ GEN David Petraeus, “Updated Tactical Directive,” Headquarters International Security Assistance Force-Afghanistan, August 2010.

² LTG William Caldwell, IV “A Call to Action Command Philosophy,” NATO Training Mission-Afghanistan/ Combined Security Transition Command-Afghanistan, June 2010, <<http://www.ntm-a.com/caldwell/blog/897-a-call-to-action-command-philosophy?lang>>

³ LTG William Caldwell, IV, “Building the Foundation,” NATO Training Mission-Afghanistan/Combined Security Transition Command-Afghanistan, June 2010, <<http://www.ntm-a.com/caldwell/blog/935-building-the-foundation?lang>>

⁴ LTC Daniel Davis, “War on the Brink of Failure, 7 Obstacles Stand in the Way of Success in Afghanistan,” Armed Forces Journal, October 2010, 4.

⁵ Department of the Army, Field Manual (FM) 3-24, Counterinsurgency, 2006.

⁶ Dr John Nagl, “Institutionalizing Adaption, It’s Time for an Army Advisor Command,” Military Review, September-October 2008, 21-26.

⁷ LTC Thomas Seagrist, “Combat Advising in Iraq, Getting Your Advice Accepted,” Military Review, May – June 2010, 65-72.

⁸ MAJ Michael Jason, “Integrating the Advisory Effort in the Army: A Full-Spectrum Solution,” Military Review, September-October 2008, 27-32.

⁹ SSgt Daylena Gonzalez, “Partnering, What You Need to Know to Stay on Track,” COIN Common Sense, Volume 1, Issue 2, April 2010, 2.

¹⁰ Mirwais Yasini, “An Afghan Perspective, A Member of the Afghan National Assembly Shares His Views on Partnering,” COIN Common Sense, Volume 1, Issue 2, April 2010, 4.

¹¹ Counterinsurgency Advisory and Assistance Team, “Partnering: A Counterinsurgency Imperative,” Small Wars Journal, November 2010.

employing cultural awareness and competency while advising, training and conducting operations.^{12,13,14,15,16,17,18,19,20}

However, combat advising courses, journal articles, blogs and books have not delivered a comprehensive, integrated, evidence-based and practical approach for advising our Afghan counterparts. These sources do not provide substantial answers to many key questions relevant to effective advising. What type of dialogue is conducive to establishing rapport and respect? How do you advance an environment of trust? What are the means for truly placing control in the hands of your Afghan partner? How do you attain an understanding of your advisees' knowledge, experiences, beliefs, values and attitudes and apply this insight and perspective for the purpose of guiding your advisee to pursue actions that will professionalize the ANSF?

Enter Motivational Interviewing, "a skillful clinical style for eliciting from patients their own good motivations for making behavior changes in the interest of their health." For over 25 years, Motivational Interviewing has proven effective in encouraging people to adopt healthy behavioral change. Motivational Interviewing was first described as a counseling approach to support substance abuse counselors in helping people manage alcoholism and other substance abuse addictions. Since then, the application of Motivational Interviewing has expanded significantly to effectively address the behavioral components of a broad range of problems to include heart disease, tobacco use, diabetes, medical treatment adherence, hypertension, and criminal recidivism just to name a few. Motivational Interviewing has been taught to a diverse range of practitioners: dentists, health educators, fitness coaches, nurses, nutritionists, physicians, probation officers and others. Motivational Interviewing has repeatedly demonstrated, through more than 160 randomized clinical trials, its value in supporting practitioners during their efforts to effect voluntary behavioral change, inclusive of teaching new skills and assisting with setting and attaining goals, among diverse populations of people.²¹

Based on our experience in delivering and receiving combat advising, we believe that Motivational Interviewing has considerable utility in helping advisors guide their ANSF counterparts toward specific actions that will create a qualified and self-sustaining ANSF capable of protecting the Afghan population and defeating the insurgency. From our observations, combat advisors often face difficulty in reaching a consensus with their ANSF advisees about what operational goals and objectives should be pursued, what problems should be solved, and what courses of action should be planned, developed and implemented to either attain goals and objectives or resolve problems. Attempts to consistently and effectively deliver high quality combat advising are often met with uneven success. A large part of the problem is that military personnel who are assigned as combat advisors do not receive adequate training and preparation

¹² Randall Brumit, "10 Partnering Principles," COIN Common Sense, Volume 1, Issue 2, April 2010,6.

¹³ LCDR "JW" Stolze, "What Does this Photo Mean to You???", Learning to Shed Our Cultural Perspectives and See the World Through Afghan Eyes," COIN Common Sense, Volume 1, Issue 2, April 2010, 8.

¹⁴ MCI Kurt Riggs, "Culture Shock," COIN Common Sense, Volume 1, Issue 2, April 2010, 8.

¹⁵ LTC Gilbert Overmaat, "Rank, Respect and Partnering," COIN Common Sense, Volume 1, Issue 2, April 2010, 10.

¹⁶ "Both Sides of the COIN, COIN is Not...COIN is...," COIN Common Sense, Volume 1, Issue 2, April 2010, 10

¹⁷ United States Army, Center for Army Lessons Learned, Handbook 09-37, "Small-Unit Operations in Afghanistan Handbook, August 2009, 109-119.

¹⁸ United States Army, Center for Army Lessons Learned, "Afghan Culture Newsletter 10-64, Observations, Insights and Lessons," September 2010.

¹⁹ CPT Daniel Helmer, "Twelve Urgent Steps for Advisor Mission in Afghanistan," Military Review, July-August 2008, 73-81.

²⁰ COL John Bessler, "Mentoring on the Edge or, What You Don't Learn in a Classroom," Small Wars Journal, July 2010.

²¹ Stephen P. Rollnick, William R. Miller and Christopher C. Butler, "Motivational Interviewing in Health Care: Helping Patients Change Behavior," The Guilford Press, 2007.

to fully embrace and successfully realize their combat advisor roles and responsibilities. Combat advisors would be more effective in advising the ANSF if they learned and practiced Motivational Interviewing during the FSF Combat Advisor Course and were encouraged to voluntarily implement the approach during their combat advising assignment.

While it is well beyond the intent and scope of this article to sufficiently cover the breadth and depth of Motivational Interviewing, we do wish to impart upon combat advisors a desire to learn more about Motivational Interviewing, give informed consideration to using it and, most importantly, voluntarily incorporate the approach into the daily advising relationship with their Afghan partner. Over the remaining balance of this article, we will briefly describe the intersection between the “spirit” and four guiding and interrelated principles of Motivational Interviewing and some of the essential elements of combat advising.

Spirit of Motivational Interviewing

Motivational Interviewing is not a technique for tricking people into doing what they do not want to do. Rather, it is a skillful clinical style for eliciting from patients their own good motivations for making behavior changes in the interest of their health. It involves guiding more than directing, dancing rather than wrestling, listening at least as much as telling. The overall “spirit” has been described as collaborative, evocative, and honoring of patient autonomy.²¹

- Stephen Rollnick, William Miller, Christopher Butler

Replace “people” and “patients” with “ANSF,” “clinical” with “advising” and “their health” with “professionalizing the ANSF” and you have a working definition for the “spirit” of Motivational Interviewing in the context of combat advising in Afghanistan. Through Motivational Interviewing, the advisor’s role is to work alongside their ANSF counterpart as an equal partner as opposed to “an uneven power relationship” where the combat advisor is the expert and ANSF personnel are passive recipients of instruction and direction. Guiding an ANSF partner toward a specific course of action depends on evoking an understanding of the individual’s own thoughts (attitudes, knowledge, beliefs and values) about and good reasons for invoking the action. Honoring the autonomy of host-nation forces recognizes that they know best if, how and when a new action should be adopted in consideration of their own individual attributes and surrounding culture, norms and physical conditions. It also recognizes that ANSF are equal partners with, and not subservient to, U.S. military forces.

Four Guiding Principles²²

1. Resist the Righting Reflex

Many people are naturally inclined to tell others what to do or try to directly persuade them to adopt a particular course of action. This is especially true among U.S. military personnel who are trained and rewarded for their take charge spirit, can-do attitude, and problem solving skills and are also doctrinally directed to seize the offensive and aggressively defeat the enemy.^{23,24} Considering this milieu, it is not surprising that combat advisors would have a strong

²² William R. Miller and Stephen P. Rollnick, *Motivational Interviewing: Preparing People for Change*, Second Edition, The Guilford Press, 1992.

²³ MAJ Mark Weber, “U.S. Military Advisor, A Need for Guiding Principles,” *Military Review*, March – April 2007, 111-113.

²⁴ Department of the Army, *Field Manual (FM) 3-0, Operations*, 2008.

inclination to reflexively right (i. e. direct) the actions of others. And when people are told what to do, either directly or subtly, they typically demonstrate a natural propensity to resist these attempts at persuasion. Moreover, Afghans are a proud people and security forces of all nations, including the ANSF, have pride.^{5,8,15} This heightens the importance of resisting the affinity toward telling, suggesting or recommending what they need to do or should do. We have, on many occasions, experienced and witnessed where advisors adopted a directing approach with their ANSF counterparts and this led to animosity, disharmony and ultimately a failure to pursue courses of action and achieve concomitant objectives benefiting both U.S military forces and ANSF.

On the other hand, we have found that a guiding approach, as put forth and comprehensively described in the Motivational Interviewing literature, has been instrumental to creating rapport, respect and a productive relationship for our advisor-advisee team. It is important to note that there are occasions where a directing approach is warranted and Motivational Interviewing does not preclude its application. However, advisors are encouraged to exercise good judgment and discernment when deviating from a guiding approach.

2. Understand Your Advisee's Motivations

For their own reasons, ANSF personnel will decide whether to engage in actions that will eventually enable ANSF institutions to protect and defend Afghanistan. Rather than advisors explaining to ANSF partners what they consider to be the rationale for building a capable ANSF, advisors should seek to understand their advisees' own concerns, beliefs, reasons, values and motivations relevant to this aspiration. The goal is not "seek first to understand and then be understood." Instead, the goal is seek to understand and then assure the advisee is understood. Following Motivational Interviewing practices, the advisor should build upon a more certain knowledge of the ANSF partner's insight, perspective and motivations to guide and support the advisee toward mutually agreed upon objectives. We have also found that the very process of asking open-ended questions to secure a deep understanding of an advisee's motivations for change helps build rapport, trust and respect.

3. Listen to Your Advisee

The guiding approach, illustrated by Motivational Interviewing, is a balance of three basic and important communication skills: asking, informing and listening. As we presented earlier, asking questions is central to comprehending the thoughts, aspirations and motivations of ANSF partners. Informing occurs when the advisor shares information and knowledge with their advisee. Given that combat advisors are deployed to Afghanistan for the very purpose of providing advice and support to ANSF, it is not surprising that advisors often fall into a role where they expend most of their time trying to convey answers to problems faced by their Afghan counterparts at the expense of eliciting the answers from the Afghans themselves. Designing, developing and applying effective courses of action that can be independently sustained by ANSF depends, to a significant degree, on advisors bringing forth answers and contextual understanding from their advisees. Good listening, which the authors of Motivational Interviewing describe as a complex and core skill of Motivational Interviewing, is the active process necessary for achieving this end-state.

4. Empower Your Advisee

Within an advisor-advisee partnership, control over decisions and actions should reside with the advisee and not the advisor. Our Afghan counterparts are equal partners in joint security efforts within Afghanistan. Extensive research on the Motivational Interviewing approach demonstrates that individuals are more likely to adopt a specific behavior if they are empowered and guided to contemplate and talk about the behavior in terms of their readiness, willingness, and ability to perform the action that is under deliberation. More specifically, a combat advisor using Motivational Interviewing seeks to empower their Afghan partner along the behavioral change continuum by helping the individual explore and articulate how they would like to proceed in accordance with their desire, ability, reasons, needs and commitment to the action in question.

Conclusion

Combat advising is integral to the advisor's primary mission, the professionalization of the host nation security forces.⁵ Partnering between combat advisors and their ANSF counterparts is the decisive ground where advisors are positioned to evoke, enable and empower their advisees to adopt actions that will lead to ANSF proficient in defending and protecting a sovereign Afghanistan. Reflecting the well-documented need to strengthen combat advisor training and subsequently improve the knowledge, skill, ability and ultimately the effectiveness of combat advisors, Motivational Interviewing should be among the core competencies taught to both aspiring as well as experienced combat advisors. By design, this article serves as a brief introduction to the spirit and principles of Motivational Interviewing. It did not cover the expansive and available base of knowledge, method and practice of Motivational Interviewing. Beyond encouraging combat advisors to read the Motivational Interviewing literature and give informed consideration to using the evidence-based approach while advising their Afghan partners, we also advocate for the incorporation of Motivational Interviewing training within the FSF Combat Advisor Course and medical pre-deployment training for Medical Embedded Training Teams deploying to Afghanistan. Motivational Interviewing has been instrumental to our partnering success and we are optimistic and confident that it will do the same for combat advisors across Afghanistan who invest the time and energy to learn and apply this approach while advising their Afghan partners.

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