

INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION SKILLS – A KEY TO SUCCESS IN COALITION OPERATIONS

INTRODUCTION

Over the past two decades, the Canadian Forces (CF) have been involved in Coalition operations ranging from peacekeeping in Cyprus, to peace enforcing in the Balkans, and Counter Insurgency Operations (COIN) in Afghanistan. More recently, as part of the NATO Training Mission – Afghanistan, the CF has been part of a Coalition committed to training, advising, and mentoring the Afghan National Army (ANA) toward becoming a self-reliant, self-sustainable army. Working amongst a very diverse Coalition, success on these types of operations comes not from knowing the doctrine and tactics, techniques, and procedures (TTP) of participating countries, but more from developing effective relationships through interpersonal communications skills.

Over a period of nine months, I was deployed as the Chief of Staff (COS) of the Kabul Military Training Centre (KMTC) Training Advisory Group (TAG), comprised of 16 nations, including a 240-soldier Canadian Contingent, all of whom were advising the ANA in some capacity. KMTC is the cradle of the ANA. It is an institution that trains up to 50 000 soldiers per year focusing primarily on basic training. Contributing nations to the Coalition at KMTC were from various ethnicities and cultures, ranging from North American, to Western European, Eastern European, Scandinavian, Australian, Asian, Middle Eastern, and Afghan. To add complexity to the array of cultures, operations within the training mission were guided by no less than four chains of command: the KMTC TAG reported through NATO channels; the United States Forces – Afghanistan (USFOR-A); our own headquarters Canadian Contribution Training Mission – Afghanistan (CCTM-A); and liaison with the ANA leadership at KMTC. A complex pattern of cultural and command weaves to navigate through.

THE PROBLEM

Although there were several chains of command, as soldiers we are trained to deal with a complex battlespace. What we were not adequately trained for was the ability to effectively communicate with several different nations and cultures, all with their own sets of norms, and all requiring some level of cultural awareness.

In preparation for a deployment to Afghanistan, Canadian soldiers undergo several hours of cultural awareness training. This training focuses on cultural sensitivities, and how to successfully interact with the people of Afghanistan. What we do not receive is training on how to interact with our multinational partners. To complicate matters further, the security risks and imposed movement restrictions create the need for other forms of information exchange. Communication in today's theatres of operation occurs predominantly through email, less through telephone, and even less through face-to-face interaction.

THE CHALLENGE

Communicating meaningfully is becoming more difficult than ever before. While technology has created an ever-increasing number of ways to communicate rapidly over great distances, so many people are now so well insulated and protected by these devices that they are losing the skill and ability to communicate in the most influential way – face-to-face. The use of electronic correspondence on today's front line, be it messaging, J-CHAT, or even Facebook provides leaders the ability to transmit information over great distances and distribute this information to large groups of people at once. This digital information can be misleading and open to interpretation, redirected, and simply answered with no more than an "ACK!" The human element and context are absent. Due to the pace of operations, we often rush to get things accomplished via email or text messaging when it would be more effective to simply pick up the phone and talk to a person on the other end.

Telephone communication provides immediacy. When operating within a multinational coalition, patterns of speech and colloquial expressions may distract from the real meaning of a conversation. Respect must be given to the effort that is being made to interact in a second language. Being polite is always expected when you speak on the telephone, but thinking about your words before you place your call can help you make your point clearly, as well as give the person on the other end of the line a good impression. Communication means listening, as well as talking. Listen attentively without cutting the other person off. Acknowledge a comment every now and then, so your caller knows you are listening, and have not just tuned out. Sentiments of agreement or disagreement can be conveyed by way of inflection in your voice whereas; periods of silence can lead to a sense of discomfort.

While technology does have its place in a combat zone, the main problem is that it is pushing personal interaction to the side. Face-to-face meetings occur in real time with no technological interference. Meetings allow participants to accurately observe both verbal and non-verbal communication of others: you cannot recognize facial expressions and hand gestures in an email message. Dealing with people personally, one-on-one, provides an opportunity to build strong social relationships and create bonds of mutual trust and confidence all leading to a sense of belonging; a transcendence of cultural and language barriers through human interaction and shared humanity. Such gatherings help people identify with the formation and see how they fit in, which instills pride and loyalty. It also provides an opportunity for commanders and leaders to silently evaluate the competencies of their subordinates and staffs. During face-to-face dealings, there is the potential to inject humour and express emotion that would be otherwise absent in digital communications thus adding the human factor. Face-to-face interaction leads to better organizational understanding, strengthens trust, and builds cohesive teams.

Over the course of our nine-month deployment, there were many examples of where digital communications faltered and where proper interpersonal communication skills proved successful.

On one occasion, a newly arrived leader chose to convey, via email, the exceptional skill sets he brought to the operation and his views on how others conducted themselves on the particular camp where he resided. The email was immediately received by thousands of

soldiers, all of whom went to great lengths to avoid any interaction with this individual. In an analogous incident, an operations officer was extremely frustrated as a result of an email response he received from a Coalition counterpart. Instead of responding with another toxic email, the operations officer met his Coalition counterpart face-to-face and discussed their issue. As a result, they were able to enjoy a very productive and professional six months together.

On another occasion, two senior officers began an emotional email debate over the tasking of a single soldier. A face-to-face discussion would have undoubtedly forced both parties to take a rational look at the situation, to be polite to each other, and ultimately determine a successful way forward.

In late February 2012, US troops at Bagram Air Base in Afghanistan burned copies of the Quran that had been used by Taliban prisoners to write messages to each other. After five days of violent protests by Afghan citizens, over 30 people had been killed and 200 wounded. Mere days later, an incident with the potential to instigate similar outcomes occurred at our camp. A misunderstanding occurred when some of the locally contracted guards witnessed what they thought to be the burning of religious material. If not controlled immediately, this situation could have resulted in further violence. The Commander of the Advisory Team and the Camp Commander called all Afghans on camp to a meeting during which the incident was openly discussed. Over the course of the meeting it was explained that the material burned was, in fact, not of a religious nature. Both commanders further expressed their respect for the Muslim faith and for the people of Afghanistan – all face-to-face with true expressions of sincerity observed by the entire audience.

The people of Afghanistan, comprised of many distinct ethnic groups, are accomplished at interacting and communicating with one another. In my dealings with the ANA leadership at KMTC, it was interesting to witness how they communicated with each other and with the Coalition. It appeared that anyone could approach anyone else in the chain of command to discuss just about any issue – a true open door policy. During these encounters, business was not the first topic of discussion; it always started with a handshake, a cup of chai, followed by pleasantries. Seemingly, amongst discussions about family, politics, and reminiscing about old times, the actual issues were cordially dealt with resulting in individuals or groups agreeably parting ways. Taking a genuine personal interest in one another establishes a human element creating a bond that allows for resolution of complex issues to be facilitated by social interactions.

INTERPERSONAL SKILLS AND COALITION OPERATIONS

Working well with others involves understanding and appreciating individual and cultural differences. How these interactions proceed can determine success or failure of the Coalition. Interpersonal skills include not only how well we communicate with others, but also our confidence and our ability to listen and understand – establish a rapport. It deals not just with what is being said, but how it is said and interpreted through tone of voice, facial expressions, gestures and body language. These non-verbal communications transcend language barriers.

Commanders within Coalitions must establish a rapport with all members of the formation including staff and subordinate commanders. This can only be achieved through a personal, direct relationship. Leaders at all levels should become familiar with the characteristics, personalities, and cultural habits of the various contributing nations. In terms of interpersonal communication skills, one must show a genuine interest in the people to whom you speak. Active listening and pertinent questions will go a long way to establishing good relationships. Perhaps we should heed more attention to the Afghan version of interpersonal communication skills.

THE RIGHT PERSON FOR THE RIGHT JOB

Canadians are known to be cooperative and tolerant by nature and well suited for operating within multinational Coalitions. With future prospects of working within Coalition Operations on the horizon, perhaps we should devote some of our pre-deployment training to improving our interpersonal communication skills. In many cases, we are taking the lead in these Coalition ventures from the Commanding General level right down to various branch heads; we need to pick the right person for the right job and assessing one's level of interpersonal skill sets will ensure diverse organizations become cohesive teams.