

Why We Keep Getting it Wrong: What Makes the JIIM so Different?

by William J. Davis, Jr.

I used to have 5,000 people who would hang on my every word, now I can't even get my desk to do what I want it to, why won't these civilians listen to me?

— Anonymous former brigade Commander

When I told a senior military officer who had spent significant time working on Capitol Hill and who had deployed to both Iraq and Afghanistan that I was thinking about writing on the leadership challenges within the Joint, Interagency, Intergovernmental, and Multinational (JIIM) environment, his eyes opened wide and he stated, “Yeah good topic, *they* need all the help *they* can get. After watching the people from the Department of State and on the National Security Council, I can tell you that *those people* don't know how to do any leading.” This perspective on leadership in the JIIM is wrong for so many reasons. This officer had fallen into a common ethnocentric trap very often espoused by leaders – that any dysfunction in and across organizations can be remedied with some good old-fashioned leader-subordinate leadership, similar to that which can be exercised within a single organization. What the leaders who espouse this forget is that not all situations, organizations, or environments are amenable to the significant hierarchical underpinnings so crucial to the success of most leaders within a single organization. As it was so aptly noted by the former brigade commander quoted above, in an organization that values mission and hierarchy above all else¹ perhaps it is a little harder to lead in an environment where there is no hierarchy, no standard operating procedures, misaligned interests, and where even the concept of a lawful order is laughable.

In an address to the Joint Forces Staff College in 1993, General Anthony Zinni discussed the leadership challenges of a joint, multinational, and interagency environment. The surprising aspect of his remarks is that when viewed today, it is as if he were providing his insights about

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the current JIIM environment. It appears that in the past quarter century, the dynamics and associated problems with leading in that environment have neither changed nor been solved. The same issues are endemic. Some may offer that it is the institutional structure that begets the problems, but it might be offered that the traditional leader-subordinate model of leadership considered desirable and practiced within most organizations does not prepare leaders to excel in an environment that has little structure. Too often, personnel from one organization will disparage those not from their organization as “non-team players” or disregard situations as “hopeless,” when in fact the only delinquency of either is that they do not fit the model in which the leader has been inculcated as the only valid model for organizational leadership and structure.

When I asked a senior State Department member who was to be posted to a troubled country of critical strategic interest to the United States, “How do you even begin to address the myriad of significant problems within the country without angering the country’s officials by placing demands on them?,” he gave me an answer that would be completely unfamiliar to most leaders who have been indoctrinated into classical models of leadership. He answered, “I will carefully observe the situation and wait for an opportunity to help when I can, align interests if I can, and have the patience to do neither if I must.” This assessment of the situation and the myriad of leadership/management options that the Department of State officer could potentially employ should become part of a model for the JIIM leader who wants to successfully lead.

Too often JIIM leaders use only the leadership techniques they developed while working in a hierarchical, mission oriented, structured organization and then lash out (as the colonel in the introduction did) that the other people in the JIIM do not know how to lead. The first step of any planning or problem solving

evolution is to gain situational awareness and often JIIM leaders are deficient when evaluating the leadership environment when outside his or her organization. This article will provide a general situational awareness of the leadership environment in the JIIM.

Setting a climate of cooperation is quite possibly the most difficult task of the leader. Unfortunately there are leaders who either are not really committed to the concept of cooperation (most likely based upon some institutionalized sense that it is competition that gets results) or have subordinates who are not intelligent, competent, team-oriented or gifted enough to see beyond their interests and put the team first.

Setting a climate of cooperation is quite possibly the most difficult task of the leader.

When I first observed this type of friction and in-fighting amongst people who should have been on the same team (an Air Wing of the U.S. Navy on aboard an aircraft carrier), it was a personal revelation for me. But what I also observed was that there were mechanisms in place to force compliance from any teamwork saboteurs. However, imagine my surprise when I observed the same disparate interests and respective degrees of diverse behavior during the planning of a NATO operation, but realized that no forcing mechanisms existed in the JIIM to truncate those who had misaligned (either valid or non-valid) interests in following the leader.

It was in this JIIM environment that I realized that before I could determine the optimal way to get things done and achieve my organization’s mission that I needed to do an analysis of the environment and determine what made it so foreign and frustrating for leaders.

What follows are seven key enduring aspects of the JIIM that a leader must appreciate in order to be able to successfully lead and operate.



Figure 1. "They will not be like you."

Each will be addressed in kind with a "*Critical Attribute for the Leader*" summary provided at the end.

1. They will not be like you
2. There is no doctrine to which every participant adheres
3. Your goals and objectives are not, and will not be, congruent with others' goals and objectives
4. There is no such thing as an order among all the participants
5. Your organization may not be liked or wanted in the JIIM by all participants
6. Language will be difficult
7. Expect no adaptability and flexibility

They will not be like you

While this first enduring aspect of the JIIM environment appears to be straight out of the book of "Captain Obvious," it requires stating because too often others are viewed through an ethnocentric lens as shown in the illustration above.

Each organization has developed its own culture and subsequent values and expectations from its leaders. It is well known that being a member of the military entails inculcation into a very unique culture of tradition, discipline, and obedience to hierarchy with an unquestioned dedication to mission accomplishment. Even though the military has always tried to promote balancing the needs of its people with mission accomplishment (hence aphorisms such as "people first, mission always") research has shown that it is the mission that has precedence over any competing values.² So, a military

leader will often enter into an effort expecting everyone else to have that same focus. Also, it is equally well known that even among the Services, military personnel will often disparage others who do not *exactly* reflect their culture. Members of the U.S. Air Force will often become the brunt of humor because they are perceived to be not as “military” as the other Services, even though their culture has generated what it takes to be the best air force in the world. Social Identity Theory informs the inclination of humans to formulate a “them versus us” perspective, and it is this tendency that creates a barrier to effectively interacting in the JIIM.³ One cannot expect a member of the Department of State to forgo building long-term relationships for the sake of mission expediency just as a member of the Department of State should not expect a U.S. Military member to disregard planning protocol when considering action. It is precisely this appreciation for the differences and subsequent potential oppositional behaviors and expectations that the JIIM leader needs to embrace.

Critical Attribute for the Leader:

It is important to understand that someone from another organization who looks different, acts different, or is differently focused than the leader’s culture, is not necessarily wrong. Tolerance and appreciation for the unique contributions of every organization is required to successfully address the problem that brought everyone together in the first place.

There is no doctrine to which every participant adheres

It has taken the United States Military over 30 years to develop a robust doctrinal library of how it expects to conduct Joint, Interagency, Intergovernmental, and Multinational operations. However, what that doctrine fails to adequately address is that other stakeholders in the JIIM are neither obliged nor necessarily inclined to

follow that doctrine. There is no single agreed upon source for how to operate in the JIIM. Each organization may have volumes of operations manuals on how *it* will conduct business, but there is no doctrine that everyone involved in the JIIM will follow. This means that leaders who operate in the JIIM will have to be adaptable and flexible in how they interface with other entities. Any type of coordinated action that needs to be taken to address problems will have to be negotiated.

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An oft shared and aspired to metaphor for managers and leaders is that of comparing the leader to the conductor of a symphony orchestra. It offers that the leader should be like a conductor; ensuring every part of the orchestra plays from the same sheet of music, thus eventually resulting in a coordinated entity that is greater than the sum of its parts. In the JIIM, this vision is a complete fantasy. When there is a lack of shared operating procedures, leaders should aspire to be like a member of an improvisational jazz band. Every band member is quite adept at playing their instrument, but the music is not tightly synchronized and choreographed. Each member improvises his or her talents to create an impressive and beautiful piece of musical art equal to a symphony, with the leader of the improvisational band as well as the timing and tempo of the music changing according to the needs of the musical environment. This metaphorical understanding of how leadership actually is in the JIIM versus how everyone wishes it were is very important for leaders to grasp as they may tend to get frustrated with the seeming lack of control that any one entity has.

Critical Attribute for the Leader:

When operating within the JIIM, there is no single way to operate that is prescribed among stakeholders. Leaders have to remain flexible and adaptable, and be willing to negotiate to determine how best to operate with other entities as the situation and environment dictate.

Your goals and objectives are not, and will not be, congruent with others' goals and objectives

I once helped develop a humanitarian assistance/disaster relief exercise for a professional military education institution that attempted to emulate the many differing agendas one might encounter in the JIIM. Many scripts were developed for participants that provided underlying agendas for participants in the effort.

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During a hot-wash after the exercise one of the participating international officers asked to see the scripted agenda for the American participants. This request took me by surprise. Because of my ethnocentric hubris, I had failed to develop one. In my mind the Americans were there for no other reason than to do charitable deeds and relieve suffering with no underlying motive. Of course, this is not always the case.

The United States, like every other country, has foreign policy goals and anytime it uses its resources and power around the world, it should be done so in support of those goals. So while this section addresses the concept of others' agendas, be aware that every other entity will be presupposing that whatever organization you represent also has an agenda or underlying motivation. Because of this, do not expect others to blindly accept your proposals or actions as being "for the greater good." JIIM leaders must

devote energy to the building of trust (or at least acceptance that your motives and objectives will not inhibit or contradict someone else's motives or objectives).

For the majority of organizations, regardless of origin, a person who wants to be successful in that organization must inculcate the values espoused by that organization. Most corporations, institutions, and government agencies go to great lengths to ensure that the organization has a published set of values and goals so as to focus the efforts of its personnel. However, the JIIM is not monolithic and is for the most part an ad hoc conglomeration of organizations. Thus, a shared set of values, goals, missions, or purpose does not singularly exist for any mission undertaking.

If a natural disaster again occurs similar to the 2010 earthquakes in Haiti, countless entities can be counted upon to arrive upon the scene to provide help. However, other than the fact that those entities are present, their motivations for being present will be as numerous as there are entities.

Imagine that you are the commander of Joint Task Force "Unified Response," responsible for the direction of 17,000 military personnel in and around Haiti. Your main focus in the early days would probably be to get the airport operational so that critical relief supplies can make it to the island in a timely fashion. In the middle of all your efforts a celebrity who is a proponent of a non-governmental organization (NGO) requests a landing time at the airport. Despite your exhortations that it is more critical to get relief supplies in rather than an entourage, you are ordered by your higher headquarters not only to ensure a landing time for the celebrity, but also that you must meet with the celebrity to figure out how best to support the efforts of the NGO he or she represents.

Or imagine that you are told your focus is the immediate relief of human suffering. So even though you might have determined that making sure the local environment is secure is a critical



Figure 2. "Your goals and objectives are not, and will not be, congruent with others' goals and objectives."

element to success, you are told not to do that and that your force will have to rely on others such as the United Nations to counter-act profiteers or other factions that threaten the mission. And, by the way, adding to your frustration is that you will have no control over how the United Nations does this. These scenarios all can and do occur. A leader in the JIIM must be aware that others might view efforts to coordinate actions as nothing more than a "fig-leaf for co-optation."⁴

As shown in the illustration above, what all this means is that any leader working in the JIIM cannot assume that there will be a single mind-set or self-sacrificing value among those who respond to the situation.

Each organization will focus on its values, interests, and reason for existence. Therefore, you must be willing to operate within an environment that will present competing and sometimes paradoxical values.

Critical Attribute for the Leader:

A leader in the JIIM must appreciate and be aware of the differing pressures that each contributing organization will be experiencing to support its unique mission-set and satisfy *its* stakeholders.

There is no such thing as an order among all the participants

There is no hierarchy within the JIIM, hence, there is no such thing as tasking or ordering another entity to do anything. The entities that participate in undertakings in the JIIM are doing so under ad hoc and voluntary agreements. If the Spanish government sends a battalion of infantry to aid in stabilizing an African nation, that battalion is obligated first and foremost to the achievement of the political objective(s) the Spanish government hoped to achieve by sending them. If a lead nation

“lead nation” is a loose term which usually means “coordinating nation”) tries to order the battalion to conduct a mission that the Spanish government deems as not congruent with its goals, then the battalion has every right to (and usually will) refuse the mission. Also, NGOs are not obligated to any organization and will usually only cooperate when it is in their best interest to do so. This behavior befuddles many JIIM leaders who have grown up in what is most likely a hierarchical government bureaucracy. Even the U.S. Departments of State and Defense, two organizations that at first glance appear to be polar opposites in their approaches to national security, share a very high organizational value of adherence to hierarchy.⁵ But alas this is not always the case with the myriad of JIIM players.

From a United States’ perspective, any action taken within the JIIM, either self-directed or in concert with other entities, requires two constructs: authority (legitimacy) and resources. Leaders should ask two questions as they conduct operations abroad: “Do I have the authority to do what I am about to do?” and “Do I have the resources available (or legally allocated to me) to do what I am trying to do?” Authority to conduct operations primarily rests upon numerous legal constructs ranging from international law, customary international law, national law, host nation law, and/or intra-organizational policies and regulations. However, there is another more insidious aspect of authority that must be of concern - the aspect of normative legitimacy.⁶ It is normative legitimacy that generally requires more forethought when taking actions. You must determine if the populace (and other entities operating in the environment) will accept that you have the right to make rules and that they can be expected to follow your rules. Adhering to normative legitimacy requires a thorough appreciation for the complexity of the environment and the entities within. Suppose you belong to the U.S. Department of Justice and you arrive on scene in Haiti to represent

the United States in a United Nations’ effort to keep the peace. In the initial planning meeting you are asked to provide advisors who can patrol with the Haitian police to advise them during operations. You must first decide if your people have the lawful authority to act as advisors on operational patrols as well as what are your limits on aiding in case of need or even self-defense. The answers to these types of questions would constitute the “legal” construct of legitimacy. However, you also have to think about “normative” legitimacy questions. Will the population accept your presence? Will the formal and informal leadership of local governments accept your presence? These questions are more difficult to answer, but nonetheless are just as critical to mission success.

Critical Attribute for the Leader:

Since no entity in the JIIM has the authority to order another to do anything, it becomes necessary for the leader to be empathetic to the legal and political restrictions that accompany participation in the JIIM.

Your organization may not be liked or wanted in the JIIM by all participants

One of the missteps made by leaders in the JIIM is that they believe that somehow the problem that brought the participants together could not be solved if they were not there (otherwise, why would they be there?). But for many participants, the primary reason they are there is solely to protect their interests. Many NGOs may have been working in a country for years and may view the actions of other newly arrived participants as incongruent with their objectives and thus may openly resent or oppose your presence. Some countries might view another country’s presence as a threat (think about how Russia might perceive a U.S. presence in Eastern Europe after a natural disaster). The current situation in Syria provides an example

of numerous factions operating in a region that are oppositional in intent and action. Many do not like each other, will not cooperate, and even clash on occasion. Leaders in the JIIM must realize that “cliques” will form and that open and honest communication and coordination should not be expected from all participants.

Critical Attribute for the Leader:

Leaders need to do an assessment of the openness and willingness to cooperate of each participant in the JIIM. Assuming that all participants will be happy to see that your, or any particular, organization is participating would be creating a risk.

Language will be difficult

Most will easily recognize that different languages provide significant challenges in the JIIM; but, there is an even more insidious threat to good communication – jargon. Organizations have developed not only a series of acronyms that are commonly used, but each will have most likely developed a unique use language.

One of the most famous examples of this is the incident that occurred during the Department of Defense’s support to civil authorities in Los Angeles in 1992. The local police told the United States Marines to “cover me” with the intent that they would be ready to fire if needed. The Marines were trained that “cover me” meant to lay down a heavy base of live fire.⁷ This classic miscommunication illustrates the point concerning differing cultural perspectives of language. While most miscommunication is not as immediately life-threatening as the USMC example, over time it can be even more debilitating.

For example, an Army headquarters acting as the Joint Task Force Leader during a recent exercise was using Army jargon such as “Blank Six” and “Blank Five.” Not only did these terms mean absolutely nothing to the other Joint participants, they were even more alienating to

the interagency participants. When this was brought to the attention of those in charge, they only replied that this was the way it was going to be done so everyone needed to get used to it. This might be considered an utter failing move in the JIIM environment. In a JIIM meeting, if you assume that everyone in attendance understands the acronyms or jargon you use, opportunities for coordination or integration may be lost because the attendees do not understand precisely what you mean nor view the situation according to your interests.

Critical Attribute for the Leader:

Be specifically aware of the jargon of your culture. Avoid jargon at all times when addressing members of the JIIM environment. And do not assume that the language of others, even when similar to yours, holds the same meaning.

Expect no adaptability and flexibility

Try to visualize what it would take to get you to abandon the cultural values that have been a part of your actions and organization for years. Should the Department of Defense be expected to abandon the planning process because another organization finds it burdensome? Or should the Federal Bureau of Investigation focus on immediate arrests vice building an intelligence picture that might manifest a larger more insidious network of crime?

In each of these situations, the obvious answer is no. At Joint Interagency Task Force South (JIATF-South), there are numerous agencies and nations that work together to prevent trafficking. However, there are no memorandums of agreement on file. The philosophy of the command is that JIATF-South operations need to be considerate of the interests of all the participants. The primary way to do this is to ensure that there are no “artificial” structures in place that require an organization or country to stay in the Task Force who does

not feel that its interests are considered. When the Task Force conducts operations, the interests of each organization are considered and integrated into the operation. This is done not by asking that an organization change to adapt to the operation, but rather that the operation uses the unique capabilities of each participant. As a leader in the JIIM, you must ask yourself what it would take to change the way you operate. If there is no answer to that question, then it is incumbent upon the leader to consider that expecting change from others is not a viable course of action.

Critical Attribute for the Leader:

Do not expect another participant in the JIIM to change the way it operates, but instead seek to find a “coupler” that will allow each organization to operate within its culture, pursue its interests, and add to solving the complex problem.

Conclusion

There is nothing that was written in this manuscript that seems especially difficult or insidious; it all appears to be common sense. However, as noted in the title, why is it so difficult to lead in the JIIM? The answer is because the environment is quite different than to that which most leaders have been normalized – one wherein the leader-subordinate model can be successfully applied. Many aspects of the JIIM environment are completely contrary to the environment in which most leaders learned to lead. By remembering the stark differences in the JIIM environment, the leader can begin to develop nuanced behaviors that optimize every capability brought by the other participants. Only then will the leader be able to make progress in addressing the complex challenges of operating and leading in the JIIM environment. **IAJ**

NOTES

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