Why We Can't All Just Get Along:
Overcoming Personal Barriers to Inter-Organizational Effectiveness and Finding Your Personal Coupler for Success

by William J. Davis, Jr.

> *DoD placed Pakistan and India in separate geographic combatant commands in order to foster U.S. military relationships with each country, given their history of tension and conflict. In contrast, State placed Pakistan and India in the same regional bureau because of political-military issues between the two nations, as well as other crosscutting issues that affect the region as a whole.[1]*
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> *– GAO Report on Interagency Collaboration, July 11, 2011*
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> *Please don't you rock my boat, cause I don't want my boat to be rockin'.[2]*
>
> *— Bob Marley*

Shared Disunity

The first quote above illustrates the differing cultural lenses through which organizations will view the same problem. However, as in the case of the India-Pakistan situation, it will take the resources and talents of a multitude of stakeholders working in unity to realize the interests of not only the U.S., but a world full of stakeholders. A question remains, however, as to how stakeholders with such dissimilar views, even though these organizations are within a single government can work together to solve complex problems. The second quote above embodies the spirit of most people in an organization – they learn to behave in certain ways and are reluctant to readily accept new ways. Increasing effectiveness when disparate inter/intra-government organizations must work together to solve problems is not easy. Many solutions have been offered, from increasing organizational cross-pollination within the United States government by enforcing Goldwater-Nichols-type legislation upon the executive branch, to standing up centers for inter-organizational cooperation. An example of a stunted view of how to solve the problems endemic to the Joint, Interagency, Intergovernmental,

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and Multinational (JIIM) environment is offered by the authors of *America's Army: A Model for Interagency Effectiveness*, which suggests that if every agency modeled its organization on that of the U.S. Army, inter-organizational operations might be more effective.[3] This ethnocentric approach is indicative of a common trap that ensnares quite a few participants of the JIIM and is a common barrier to successful leadership within. Although ensuring everyone does things the same way or has the same values may seem

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like a panacea solution, it is also impossible. Some will argue that the best way to overcome the unique environmental factors in the JIIM is through knowledge of the culture, capabilities, and limitations of each stakeholder. This is also a quite impossible feat because of the vast number and uniqueness of the participants in the JIIM. What I am offering within these pages is that the first and most critical step in becoming a successful leader in the JIIM is to not let your prejudices or lack of knowledge pervert or inhibit you from being able to effectively operate. Unfortunately, letting go of one's prejudices is easier said than done. Second, I will offer a more philosophical outlook on leading within the JIIM which relies on using the principles of the Six Cs – comprehension, consensus, cooperation, coordination, compromise and communication.

Barriers to effective leadership in the JIIM might not be so much about collective organizational differences, but about how the preferences and prejudices of individuals manifest in ethnocentric behaviors or

perspective that inhibit effective cooperation. The Departments of Defense (DoD) and State, both fairly large government bureaucracies, organizationally share a disdain for the values of innovation and adhocracy, and yet each views the other organization not only as more inflexible, but also at times, inferior.[4]

This ethnocentric phenomenon might be explained by looking to Edgar Schein, a respected theorist of organizational psychology, who defines organizational culture as, "A pattern of shared basic assumptions that the group learned as it solved its problems that has worked well enough to be considered valid and is **passed on to new members as the correct way to perceive, think, and feel in relation to those problems"**[5] (emphasis added*)*. Those who have become invested in an organization have been taught **the correct way** to perceive, think, and act, so not only are they wary of any other way, but they also consider any other way of doing things as just plain wrong. The negative impact of such mistrust, even among individuals within organizations, has been thoroughly documented.[6] The prevalence of this normative thinking and subsequent exclusive behavior becomes amplified within the JIIM. Exposure to the culture, capabilities, and limitations of other stakeholders in the JIIM is limited. Even within agencies that reside in the federal government of the United States, job security is so strong that an employee is more likely to die than to go to work for another agency.[7] The lack of cross pollination of stakeholders makes it very unlikely that a leader will be indoctrinated into the knowledge necessary to understand the nuanced behaviors of other organizations.

However, recent studies point to some successes in overcoming the prejudice associated with ethnocentric thinking. For example, although DoD officers hold a significant amount of mistrust toward members of other agencies, that mistrust was negated whenever the officer spent significant time working with

other agencies.[8] In addition, Munsing and Lamb report that Joint Interagency Task Force South continues to effectively prosecute a counter-trafficking mission without the administrative burden of memorandum of agreements between agencies, thus establishing an environment of trust and unity of effort.[9] And additionally, it was determined that although from the same federal agency, members of the various Services within the DoD used to revile each other almost to the point of not being able to be effective when working together, they now, arguably, have an equal sense of community and trust among the Services as they do within their own Service.[10]

While the literature on cross-functional (inter-organizational) organizations is replete with social science theory that might be helpful to those who are charged with putting together one of these efforts, case studies of previous successes fail to come up with a cookie-cutter solution to make inter-organizational efforts a success[11] Although a one-size-fits-all theory does not exist in social science,[12] identifying variables that consistently appear as keys to the environment is not a reach, and indeed, the literature is replete with best practices. However, organizational culture is one variable identified throughout the literature as having some sort of impact on inter-organizational effectiveness and it is posited that assumptions influenced by organizational culture are often the major source of conflict in any effort.[13] According to Schein, within the tenets of organizational culture is a built-in prejudice that one's organizational culture is the correct organizational culture. Overcoming ethnocentric prejudices manifested by organizational parochialism is the key to success for members operating in an inter-organizational environment. This paper is intended to provide some insight into the common cognitive obstacles that feed individual prejudices, in hopes that self-understanding will mitigate organizational parochialism and result in practices that will enhance interactions among all organizations.

Self-Examination: A Difficult Task

Overcoming one's prejudices is difficult under the best of circumstances and more complicated than most think. Perhaps even more difficult than overcoming prejudices is identifying organizational assumptions and differences among organizations that are potential friction points. How can an individual who works for DoD, a very hierarchical organization, realize and overcome prejudice against a non-hierarchical organization, especially if there is not individual self-awareness that it is the very idea of non-hierarchy that leads to feelings of contempt? Instead of focusing on the differences, an individual attempting to overcome ethnocentric prejudices needs to determine why those differences and subsequent feelings might exist. To overcome one's cultural biases, one must focus on the "whys" of cultural differences and not solely on the differences.

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First, one needs to become acutely aware of the whys of one's own culture. This should provide insight into why one's organization is the way it is (why something or some way is taught as a correct way). Once that is determined, then one can analyze the "whys" of the partnering culture. Sun Tzu's aphorism that knowing oneself and the enemy will ensure victory is apropos in this instance. Typically, members of an organization make observations and jump to conclusions without examining the assumptions that they hold dear.[14] For example, the U.S. Army is a very planning-oriented culture, whereas the U.S. Navy has more of an emergent approach to operational decision making, and there

are good reasons for each cultural value. The Army has a mission to maneuver thousands of people in a defined battle space; so in order to avoid tragic outcomes such as fratricide in a chaotic environment where the leaders cannot control most decisions, the organization gives preeminence to planning. In contrast, the Navy's maneuver element usually consists of 6–8 ships with each one outfitted with a full communications suite and seasoned commanders able to communicate critical information to all involved. The operating environment for each is quite unique and requires different approaches to operations. If one were from the Army and did not understand what was just explained there might be a tendency to denigrate the Navy as a cowboy culture that does not properly plan; or likewise, someone from the Navy might have a tendency to label the Army as overly inflexible.

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Ways of Viewing Inter-organizational Efforts and Cultures

To be effective in the inter-organizational arena (i.e., accomplish the dictates of the effort while also protecting one's organizational interests), members of organizations within the JIIM must understand their own organizational cultures and how they view other cultures. Members often differ on how they view their roles in the inter-organizational arena.

Some members hold the naïve view that they and others can freely set aside their long-held perspectives and beliefs and just work together "to get the job done." However, in the mind of each member, it often becomes *the other* organization's burden to set aside its cultural proclivities to make the effort more harmonious.

Members who view inter-organizational efforts as unitary will be severely disappointed and frustrated and, most likely, minimally effective when incorporating the capabilities and limitations of the various organizations to affect the mission.

Some members hold the view that although some differences in the cultures of the various organizations exist, all members of the effort are unitary in their purpose and will set aside those differences for the betterment of all. The members of an inter-organizational effort might believe that since all members are agencies of the U.S. that their purpose is singular; therefore, there should be a dominant goal and shared values. Although most inter-organizational efforts have some sort of shared purpose, that shared purpose does not always translate well into shared vision. A disparate frame of reference will most likely result in a tension-filled effort. Military joint doctrine emphasizes determining an end state and accompanying termination criteria for DoD. In contrast, the Department of State hopes to have a mission in the country without termination; therefore, its goal is to establish a position of continuing advantage and long-term benefits at the expense of immediate results. Although some long-term approach thinking as applied to crisis situations has manifested in the Theater Campaign Plan (the preeminent plan to which all United States' military operations will eventually transition),[15] in a cultural sense, the military still focuses on more immediate, measurable results. Any member of an inter-organizational effort who believes such organizational values will be set aside in pursuit of a common objective will also be frustrated.

Some members may be aligned completely with the purpose of the effort, while others may have cultures and agendas that lie outside the dominant effort. However, it is important to note that being a member of a culture on the periphery of the effort is not necessarily pejorative—it

is only different. DoD might concentrate on handling short-term challenges with the goal of handing off the effort to a long-term focused organization, while the long-term focused organization will most likely view problems through a different lens than those who are the first responders. Building consensus as to what values and purposes make up the inter-agency effort should be built through consensus.[16]

Most members share the interests of the larger inter-organizational effort; however, they also have their own interests. Organizations that make up a provincial reconstruction team (PRT) usually focus on immediate security, providing economic systems, providing basic services, and gaining support for representative government.[17] However, the same organizations whose primary efforts are this disparate will have significant differences. Accepting those cultural differences can make a PRT member more effective in accomplishing an agreed-upon vision and thus be better able to realize how the capabilities and limitations of one's organization might benefit the effort. Finally, some members become frustrated with the differences in culture among organizations, conclude there is no hope for the inter-organizational effort, and just go their own way. The key to success is realizing that an inter-organizational effort lies somewhere between the overly optimistic view that agencies will "just work together to get the job done" and the counter-productive attitude of dismissing the idea out of hand.

Other Bad Thoughts

There is a tendency among members of any organization to view askance the members of another organization who are not similar, and in some cases even those organizations that are similar will view each other's motives as suspect. One of the most discouraging episodes of this country's recent inter-organizational history was the cultural fault line that appeared more often than it should have between State and DoD during Operation Iraqi Freedom. Senior DoD officers made disparaging comments about State members who were having a difficult time filling personnel requirements in Iraq. However, what these DoD officers did not understand was that few sign up to work for State with the intent to go to war. State employees knew that austere environments or even some potentially hazardous working conditions might exist, but the idea of having one's life threatened at all times was incongruent with the assumed values of the organization.

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It is quite common for members of one organization to be critical of another organization's members because of a lack of understanding of the other (and one's own) organization's culture. One culture's perception of chaos might be another culture's perception of discipline, or one culture's bureaucracy might be another culture's order. Each organizational culture develops based on the group's unique operating environment and mission. As much ridicule that is often focused on the Air Force from other Services for being a "country club" culture, the fact is that the U.S. Air Force is the best Air Force in the world. Although the discipline displayed in that organization is quite different from the discipline displayed in the Marine Corps, it was developed pursuant to the optimization of the mission in its environment. Oftentimes, members of distinct organizational cultures use visible cultural differences as a poor excuse for not getting things done in an inter-organizational effort.

Finding Your Personal Coupler

When members from disparate agencies of Joint Interagency Task Force South were asked if their culture was changed because of the inter-organizational environment, they replied with a very firm "no." They said the secret to the success was in finding a "coupler" that allowed the different cultures to work together, not forgoing cultural individuality.[18] Potential couplers mentioned were building true consensus, communicating the environment and options for actions, coordinating harmoniously, cooperating in compliance with the aforementioned agreed upon consensus, and most importantly a comprehension of each other's roles, limitations, and capabilities.[19] These couplers are interesting in that most leadership models do not mention them as critical leader attributes. However, in the JIIM, it is safe to posit that a leader who is not aware of these concepts, will most likely fail in any endeavor undertaken. That is why it is important to investigate and define these concepts further.

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Comprehend

When I was the curriculum director of the Joint Forces Staff College, I conducted a needs assessment to determine the skills and knowledge needed for an effective Joint-qualified officer. From the perspective of those I interviewed, the most critical requirement was an understanding of the capabilities and limitations of the other military services. However, I quickly learned that no matter the level of experience of a military leader, he or she would never know enough about other military services in order to efficiently employ them. Working in an inter-organizational environment in the JIIM is no different. Participants must know about what each contributing organization "brings to the table," but in a very complex environment such as the JIIM where there are innumerable players, one person cannot possibly know the capabilities and limitations of all participants. In a long-standing organization such as the Department of Defense's United States Southern Command's Joint Interagency Task Force South (JIATF South), agencies share offices and use long-established procedures that involve all contributors so that participants can see the whole picture and determine what their agency might offer. The physical and virtual environment that JIATF South operates in is a catalyst for dialogue among the participants. The enduring nature of some inter-organizational relationships, such as JIATF South, will make it easier to comprehend the limitations and capabilities of partners, however, in the JIIM, most undertakings are ad hoc. In an ad hoc or crisis situation, dialogue among the participants is critical to unveiling the capabilities and limitations of each agency. In these situations, a physical space shared by all representatives from the various participants and an open and inquisitive approach from every member is necessary. If you do not take the initiative to communicate with others, do not assume that they will provide valuable and necessary information concerning their organization's capabilities. So ironically, to comprehend is not so much about understanding others, but about understanding one's limited ability to know all and effectively dialogue with others. In addition, do not assume that others in the JIIM are familiar with your capabilities and limitations. The most important dynamic that agency or military representatives can establish is open dialogue. Comprehension can only be gained through such dialogue.

Coordinate

Participants in the JIIM often interpret "coordination" to mean "de-confliction," but a dictionary definition tells us that the word means "to work or act together harmoniously." This does not mean that each agency stays out of the others' way, but that all agencies plan each action to maximize the effect of all other actions taking place. Military efforts to rebuild medical care in Mogadishu in Somalia during the early 1990s focused on the military providing free medical care to Somali nationals. However, the military failed to coordinate with the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), which was working to ensure that Somali doctors returned to Mogadishu. Because the military and USAID did not coordinate their efforts, Somali nationals went to the free hospitals set up by the military, but Somali doctors lost clientele and left Mogadishu. If the military had coordinated their efforts with USAID, and supported the program to establish a long-term health care system, it is easy to venture a guess that the result might have been different.

Cooperate

According to Webster, to cooperate is "to act jointly or in compliance with others." While one can argue that cooperation is an organizational value displayed throughout most institutions, however, the cooperation that most often takes place within a single organization is specious at best. Remember, even a flat organization still has a hierarchical underpinning that provides a forcing function for cooperation. At one time, cooperation was so lacking among the military branches of the U.S. military Services that Congress had to enact the Department of Defense Reorganization Act of 1986 to force those Services to sufficiently cooperate. There are those who argue that a similar act would force cooperation among the various agencies of the U.S. government. However, there will always remain the leadership challenge of gaining cooperation of other nations, NGOs, and other players in the JIIM, even if the various members from the United States government were somehow co-opted or formed into a single-minded organization.

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Compromise

Although the word "compromise" may have a negative connotation to the culture of many organizations[20], willingness to compromise is essential for success in the JIIM. A common definition is "a settlement of differences reached by mutual concessions." Most people compromise every day without realizing it just by living in society and making decisions.[21] For the leader in the JIIM, it is important to realize that often times, compromise of objectives is necessary to building consensus. In the long-term, it is necessary to compromise on organizational short-term objectives. The building of true consensus requires extensive dialogue and time. This is where understanding one's culture is critical. A leader in the JIIM must be aware of his or her own cultural value towards dialogue and compromising on objectives.

Consensus

The ability to have everyone agree—to build consensus—is a significant talent that must be mastered in order to become a successful leader within the JIIM. Building consensus takes time, and is garnered through dialogue. Going to Webster once again, it is found that consensus is "a collective opinion." Consensus building is a skill that, for the most part, is foreign to many people who have had their primary leadership experiences in a single organization. A common principle or mantra of most leadership paradigms is that "it is fine to challenge the boss, but once the decision is made, you need to support the

decision as if it were your own." Decisions in the JIIM are more complex and usually do not follow common leadership expectations. If an agency does not think a consensus has been reached, the agency may not participate in the proposed solution or it may even act in opposition to it, and the decision maker has little power to force compliance. Consensus is probably the most critical aspect of accomplishing national objectives during an interagency operation.

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One of my favorite examples of failing to embrace the leadership principles necessary for success in the JIIM is when a major general in the Army called me in to ask me why everyone (DoD civilians) was not supporting his vision. I discussed the need for dialogue to build consensus. He looked at me askance and said that he indeed did build consensus. That he had a meeting and told everyone what was going to happen and no one spoke up. This obviously was not building consensus, but the flag officer's cultural bias did not allow him to understand the nuance of true consensus.

Communication

Having to communicate effectively to convince an individual or organization to do something is foreign to those who are used to the singular focus on an organization. The hierarchical design of most organizations, and in particular any military organization, is based upon the assumption that one will do what one is told by those higher in the organization. However, in the JIIM, such a hierarchy does not exist. To persuade others to follow an agreed upon plan, one must have evidence and a sound argument to prove that what is proposed will

actually contribute to solving identified problems (and also that it will not prove detrimental to the goals and objectives of the other participants). A commander of three multinational divisions in Bosnia had to visit each division commander after an operations order was published to convince them that the order would be good for the overall mission and their particular stake in it. Perhaps this commander may have avoided such visits by applying the six Cs before the order was published, but regardless, he recognized the need to effectively communicate. Likewise, in many disaster relief scenarios, the host nation and other national leaders need to be intimately involved with any actions being taken or what some organization thought they would be doing might be vetoed.

Recommendations

One thing is evident: Each coupler requires individuals who are able to overcome systemic problems associated with inter-organizational efforts. Anyone operating within the inter-organizational environment should consider incorporating the following recommendations into any actions taken to frame and operate in the environment:

- **Understand your culture**. All members of an organization should know the "whys" of their culture. For example, it is not enough to know that DoD is a planning culture, members must also understand the reason behind this proclivity and the subsequent limitations and capabilities associated with it. Knowing the "whys' will allow the member to better communicate the nuances of the culture to those of other organizations, thus enhancing communication and understanding.

- **Ask questions**. Members should ask questions of other participants to better appreciate the cultural and physical capabilities and limitations that an

organization brings. Cultivating a culture of inquisitiveness during inter-organizational operations is critical to success. Assumptions are dangerous in situations such as crisis response. Sometimes for DoD personnel, whose culture, most times, is a rapid action-oriented one, taking the time to understand the culture of the other participants can be frustrating. Likewise, a member of an organization more concerned with long-term success will become frustrated with an individual or organization that appears to be doing things without regard for "what happens next."

- **Build consensus**. Consensus must be achieved through dialogue. This dialogue takes time and requires an ability that may not necessarily be fostered within a single organization. It is a special skill that should be cultivated for those operating in the inter-organizational environment. A lot of government organizations highly value their form of hierarchy, even though the hierarchies among organizations will look different to the casual observer.[22] An ambassador has no less hierarchical authority within State than a general officer has within DoD. The organizations may just internalize that hierarchy differently. Any form of consensus building will most likely involve waiting for those personnel involved in solving problems to gain permission to do things that are outside of their cultural norm.

As a reflective practitioner, understanding and making conscious one's organizational assumptions will provide a basis for examining one's biases, prejudices, or unfounded expectations toward another organization. It will only be through a mutual understanding of how group identity affects thoughts and behaviors that those involved in inter-organizational efforts will be able to effectively operate as a team. It is not a matter of creating like organizations, but of developing couplers that maximize the unique capabilities of each organization. Inter-organizational efforts begin with individuals meeting together to tackle problems that no single organization has the talent or resources to solve on its own. It will be those same individuals, creating personal couplers to overcome perceived barriers, who will ensure the effort is a success. *IAJ*

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