

# Achieving

# *Unity of Effort*

**by Matthew K. Wilder**

***When agencies cooperate, one defines the problem and seeks help with it. When they act jointly, the problem and options for action are defined differently from the start. Individuals from different backgrounds come together in analyzing a case and planning how to manage it. Since 9/11, those issues have not been resolved.***

***The 9/11 Commission Report, 22 July 2004***

**I**t has been well established by the nation's leadership and current experience that military conflict has evolved in response to the increasingly complex realities of the global war on terrorism. Part of this reality is the introduction of a whole-of-government strategy as a key enabler to operations that were once the exclusive purview of military units. An example of this strategy is the introduction of interagency civilian intelligence and cultural advisors at all levels of military command, from joint task force to battalion. An examination of future threats and potential areas of operation, such as other nations in the Middle East and Africa, indicate that this trend toward greater interagency integration will not only continue, but will likely increase.<sup>1</sup>

Despite a strong commitment from both military and civilian leadership and significant efforts on the part of their agencies to make these partnerships meaningful and productive, the integration of military and civilian professionals into cross-functional interagency teams could be made much more effective. An effective interagency team achieves unity of effort in its activities irrespective of unity of command. From the interagency perspective, achieving unity of command is relatively easy for interagency teams led by a member of the military and incorporated into a military organization because the rank structure is more rigid and transparent. However, true unity of effort as expressed as horizontal (inclusive of all team members and agencies) instead of vertical (along stove-piped chains of command) integration has proven much more elusive, regardless of

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the composition of the interagency team.<sup>2</sup> The purpose of this article is to highlight the role of the mid- to senior-level leader (either civilian or military) tasked with leading an interagency team comprised of both military and civilian members in achieving unity of effort. To address some of the challenges and opportunities posed in the leadership of such a team, it is useful to explore an interagency case study involving provincial reconstruction teams (PRT) and then expand on the common problems of integration and the education, training, and selection of successful interagency team leaders and members.

### **Provincial Reconstruction Teams in Afghanistan**

The use of PRTs throughout Afghanistan has been the quintessential case study of the necessity for interagency cooperation and the conduct of blended civilian-military teams. PRTs were established in late 2002 to improve security, assist the Afghan government in administering tribal areas, and facilitate reconstruction.<sup>3</sup> Each PRT was comprised of members of the Department of Defense (DoD), tasked with military matters and protection of the team; members of the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), which led reconstruction efforts; and members of the Department of State, responsible for political advisory and reporting.<sup>4</sup> Occasionally other members, such as an agricultural advisor from the Department of Agriculture, would be added to the team. In 2006, after four years of operation, the USAID sponsored a study that examined why interagency teams sometimes fail to achieve optimum performance. Specifically, PRTs failed to fully achieve the desired results in Afghanistan because of a combination of factors that are common challenges to many interagency teams:<sup>5</sup>

- Lack of clear guidance from the convening

authority regarding each member's role and responsibility within the team.

- Failure of the team leadership to solicit and incorporate ideas from team members and their representative organizations.
- Lack of combined team training to become fully operational prior to deployment.
- Lack of clear understanding of the organization, role, and mission of the team and each organization's contribution to the overall goal.
- Issues affecting unity of effort, such as the successful transition of responsibility, interactions among team members, and the interrelationships between leadership and team members.

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Experienced interagency team members and leaders will quickly recognize that these challenges are not unique to PRTs. The first step to overcoming these factors is to understand the challenges posed by integrating individuals from disparate organizations into a cohesive team to achieve unity of effort.

### **The Integration Challenge**

Interagency teams and especially those found in government service have existed since the Revolutionary War. Regardless of this long history of interagency integration, often neither

team leaders nor team members are effectively trained or educated to operate in an interagency setting. The exceptions are certain rotational assignments and training opportunities that will be explored later. Although integration challenges exist in any interagency setting, one of the most prevalent is assigning civilian professionals to military teams without regard to prior military experience or familiarization with the military culture or its planning processes. Similarly, military professionals who are chosen to lead interagency teams without regard for their experience leading civilians may soon find they lack the necessary fundamental knowledge and understanding of their interagency partners to provide direction and integrate available interagency capabilities. All too often, interagency team leaders make decisions without fully understanding how each organization's culture impacts the team. Several different leadership styles may be necessary to maximize performance and

inception in 2007, the command realized that not only was interagency coordination vital, it was absolutely necessary for command success. Although faced with several challenges that included differing amounts of interagency participation, limited resources, and numerous chains of command, AFRICOM leadership adeptly managed the integration of interagency civilians into a traditionally military and DoD dominant environment. The primary mechanism for this success was understanding each individual organization's contributions and challenges, combined with a concerted effort to fully integrate each organization into the command in "full partner" status instead of relegating them to an advisory or liaison role.<sup>6</sup>

In this manner, AFRICOM achieved unity of effort that transcended interagency lines. This experience identified three areas that are keys to achieving unity of effort: education, training, and selecting the right integrated team members.

### **The Education Challenge**

One of the more effective methods of preparing individuals to serve as productive members of an interagency team is to build the skillsets necessary for success through education, especially education obtained outside the individual's parent organization. These educational opportunities provide insights regarding roles, authorities, and capabilities of other organizations that are difficult to obtain while in one's own comfort zone. To maximize the benefit both for the individual and his or her future interagency team, these educational opportunities should occur early in the individual's career, but after he or she acquires the fundamental knowledge and skills of the parent agency.

There have been several initiatives that emphasize education as a key component to success in the interagency setting, notably the DoD Civilian National Security Professional

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efficiency. Interagency team leaders who do not comprehend how different cultures interact within an interagency team may miss an opportunity to lead the team to its full potential, such as the PRTs referenced above.

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Development Implementation Plan and Presidential Executive Order 13434, both of which mandate training, education, and experience as cornerstones to interagency success. However, most federal agencies put little or no effort in education, preferring instead to send their professionals to shorter training courses or to depend on mentoring and on-the-job training for skill acquisition. Part of this de-emphasis on education is culture, but part is also driven by the lack of personnel management systems that allow for education without negatively impacting the career path of the individual or staffing requirements of the parent organization.

One of the most valuable and perhaps most overlooked opportunities for both military and civilians to gain a better understanding of how to be an effective part of an interagency team is attendance at one of the military career service schools. These schools include the intermediate-level education opportunities afforded by the Army Command and General Staff School at Fort Leavenworth, KS; the Air Command and Staff College at Maxwell Air Force Base, AL; the College of Naval Command and Staff at Newport, RI; and the Marine Corps Command and Staff College at Quantico, VA.

Each service also offers similar senior service schools that are available for civilians, often at the GS-14/15 level. A service-specific school is not the only opportunity for civilians to gain valuable experience with the military; the joint community also features the Joint Forces Staff College and the National War College. The National Defense University and Defense Acquisition University also offer programs to both military and interagency civilians. All of these opportunities are important for civilians, not only for their educational value, but also for the broadened perspectives vital to the success of interagency teams.

## The Training Challenge

In effective interagency teams all members are familiar with the professional culture, background, operating procedures, and planning processes each member brings to the team based on the parent agency he or she represents. Integrated interagency training and rotational assignments are some of the most efficient and effective ways to ensure military and civilian leaders are fully prepared to become interagency team members. In much the same way as interagency education benefits all participants involved, joint and rotational assignments give both the participant and the

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gaining organization valuable insight into how to best integrate individuals into interagency teams.

For military leaders, there are numerous opportunities to pursue rotational assignments in civilian interagency organizations and collaborate with civilians in military organizations. For example, many DoD and intelligence agencies have billets and positions dedicated to the military on a rotational basis and have integrated senior military leaders into their organizational hierarchy. Unfortunately, civilians have far fewer opportunities for rotational assignments. Often, a culture of “out of sight, out of mind” prevails in civilian organizations, and those individuals

considering joint and rotational assignments fear that participation in these programs may negatively impact their careers. However with increased emphasis on joint duty credit for promotion and reciprocal exchange programs among civilian organizations that allow for an immersive, interagency experience without loss in manpower to a losing organization, this culture is beginning to change.

Fortunately, there are also several shorter duration opportunities for training that can bridge the gap in understanding between military and civilian team members and can greatly enhance the interagency team. An excellent example is the partnership between the National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency (NGA) and the Army Command and General Staff College (CGSC). This partnership involves the integration of NGA analysts into the tactics and simulations exercises that are the capstones of the educational experience in CGSC. Although only lasting several weeks, the partnership increases the NGA analysts' understanding of how to optimize support to the military. Likewise, the CGSC students gain a thorough understanding of the capabilities provided by NGA that may prove invaluable throughout their careers.

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### **The Selection Challenge**

Equally important to the integration, education, and training of the interagency team members is the careful formation of the teams themselves. Too often, the interagency team is comprised of members that volunteer, or

who are not otherwise employed. However, as demonstrated by both the PRTs in Afghanistan and the interagency teams at AFRICOM, the selection of interagency team members must be a deliberate process. While there are numerous books and articles written on how to successfully form interdisciplinary teams in the business world, several best practices developed by the consulting firm McKinsey and Company are the most applicable to interagency team formation. The McKinsey model is particularly appropriate because it involves sending specially-trained consultants to work with businesses that have an existing culture, structure, and set of norms. Despite the challenges inherent in these circumstances, McKinsey consultants consistently manage to build teams that transcend the pitfalls of unity of command and achieve unity of effort.

One best practice of the McKinsey team-building method is to compose a team that is competent and has the capacity and qualifications to work well together.<sup>7</sup> In interagency teams, often the capacity to work well with others is as important as the individual's expert knowledge and intelligence. As demonstrated by the best practices developed by PRTs and AFRICOM, this trait is further developed when interagency teams have the opportunity to train together frequently.

Another best practice of the McKinsey process is demonstrated when only one or two interagency civilians are assigned to augment a large team of predominately military members (a common occurrence). In this case, team leadership must carefully and consciously select those augmentees according to how well they can adapt and contribute to the combined outcome of the team.<sup>8</sup> All too often, if the interagency civilians have not served previously with the military or have not attended one of the education or training courses described earlier, they will be unable to overcome their lack of experience and make substantial contributions

to the team. Other best practices that work well for McKinsey include the following:

- Although teams are often comprised of members with diverse skillsets and rank within the organization, each team member has the right and obligation to dissent on any issue without fear of reprisal and shares the same values and principles of the parent organization.
- Teams are comprised of both subject matter experts and more junior team members that are assigned to the team for the broadening experience.
- Team members are given the opportunity to prepare for assignments to interdisciplinary teams through training and education.
- Throughout the process, team members are provided coaching and feedback on performance. The firm's strong commitment to mentorship endures during the assignment, even if mentoring must be conducted virtually.
- While team members may work away from the parent organization and headquarters, they are still connected to the firm and its resources in the form of continuing research and administrative support. This support allows team members to be fully committed to the team mission and not be distracted by issues that can be addressed by support personnel.<sup>9</sup>

A final McKinsey best practice is to adopt a relatively flat hierarchy among interagency civilians on an integrated team.<sup>10</sup> Although the military members of the team have a very defined and necessary hierarchy, civilians on the team must try to avoid adopting that approach, regardless of rank or position at the civilian's parent organization. A flat hierarchy allows their team's leadership to incorporate their perspectives and inputs when forming decisions and direction.

The best practices of one organization are not an all-encompassing recipe for success in an interagency environment, but they do provide insight into a firm that has excelled at building teams since 1923. These practices also address and limit the challenges to achieving unity of effort, which led to the mixed track record of PRT effectiveness in Afghanistan.

## **Conclusion**

As many interagency team leaders have discovered, forming and leading interagency teams that transcend unity of command and achieve unity of effort involve a concerted effort that begins long before the team is convened. There are several examples of organizations that achieve unity of effort in both the military and civilian settings and provide lessons learned that are universal when forming and leading interagency teams. As a whole, the successful interagency team is comprised of individuals that are properly integrated, well prepared through interagency education and training, and carefully selected for team membership through a deliberate process. In this manner, the team is postured for success and can reap all the benefits that are inherent in achieving unity of effort. **IAJ**

## Notes

- 1 2011 National Military Strategy, United States Department of Defense, 2011, p. 6.
- 2 Christopher J. Lamb and Edward Marks, “Chief of Mission Authority as a Model for Interagency Integration,” *Institute for National Strategic Studies: Strategic Perspectives No. 2*, National Defense University, Washington, DC, 2010, pp. 5-6.
- 3 Department of State, Office of the Coordinator for Stabilization and Reconstruction; Department of Defense, Joint Center for Operational Analysis/U.S. Joint Forces Command; and U.S. Agency for International Development, Bureau for Policy and Program Coordination, “Provincial Reconstruction Teams in Afghanistan: An Interagency Assessment,” June 2006, p. 8.
- 4 Ibid.
- 5 Ibid., p. 10.
- 6 William Ward, “What ‘Right’ Looks Like in the Interagency: A Commander’s Perspective,” *Interagency Journal*, Vol. 2, Issue 1, Winter 2011.
- 7 Ethan M. Rasiel, *The McKinsey Way*, McGraw-Hill Publishing, New York, 1999, p. 59.
- 8 Ibid., p. 60.
- 9 Resource Revolution, McKinsey and Company, <<http://www.mckinsey.com>>, accessed on December 1, 2011.
- 10 Rasiel, p. 65.