

# Why We Can't All Just Get Along: Overcoming Personal Barriers to Inter-organizational Effectiveness

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.<sup>1</sup>*

## Shared Disunity

The opening quote of this article 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 government agencies working in unity to realize the interests of the U.S. A question remains, however, as to how agencies with such dissimilar views can work together to solve complex problems. 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 by enforcing Goldwater-Nichols-type legislation upon the executive branch, to standing up centers for inter-organizational cooperation. *America's Army: A Model for Interagency Effectiveness* even suggests that if every agency modeled its organization on that of the U.S. Army, inter-organizational operations might be more effective.<sup>2</sup>

However, barriers to effective interaction might not be so much about collective organizational differences, but about how the preferences and prejudices of individuals manifest in ethnocentric behaviors. For example, both the Departments of Defense (DoD) and State organizationally share a disdain for the values of innovation and adhocracy, and each views the other organization not only

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as more inflexible, but also at times, inferior.<sup>3</sup> This ethnocentric phenomenon might be explained by looking to Edgar Schein, a most 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**”<sup>4</sup> (emphasis added).

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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.<sup>5</sup> The prevalence of this normative thinking and subsequent exclusive behavior becomes amplified within the agencies of the federal government. Employment mobility among agencies is minimal, so exposure to the culture, capabilities, and limitations of other agencies is limited. Federal job security within agencies is so strong that an employee is more likely to die than go to work for another agency.<sup>6</sup>

However, recent studies point to some successes in overcoming the prejudice associated with ethnocentric thinking. For

example, Davis finds that 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.<sup>7</sup> 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.<sup>8</sup> Additionally, Davis finds 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.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Although a one-size-fits-all theory does not exist in social science,<sup>11</sup> identifying variables that consistently appear as keys to the environment is not a reach, and indeed, the literature is replete with best practices. Organizational culture is one variable identified throughout the literature as having some sort of impact on inter-organizational effectiveness. Assumptions influenced by organizational culture are often the major source of conflict in any effort.<sup>12</sup> 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 article 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. For example, 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 inbred cultural biases, one must focus on the "whys" of culture, not solely on the differences.

Becoming aware of the "whys" of one's culture should provide insight into why an organization is the way it is (why something or some way is taught as a correct way). Once that is determined, one can analyze the "whys" of the partnering culture. Typically, members of an organization make observations and jump to conclusions without examining the assumptions that they hold dear.<sup>13</sup> For example, in general, 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 culture. 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 U.S. Navy's maneuver element usually consists of 6–8 ships with each one outfitted with a full communications suite and seasoned personnel able to communicate critical decisions to all involved. The operating environment for each is quite different and requires different approaches to operations. If one were from the U.S. Army, and did not understand what was just explained, there might be a tendency to denigrate the U.S. Navy as a cowboy culture that does not properly plan; or likewise, someone from the U.S. Navy might have a tendency to label the U.S. 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 agencies within the inter-agency effort 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, 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 the 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. For example, military joint doctrine emphasizes determining an end state and accompanying termination criteria for DoD. In contrast, State hopes to have a mission in the country without

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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 military operations will eventually transition),<sup>14</sup> 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. For example, 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.<sup>15</sup>

Most members share the interests of the larger inter-organizational effort; however, they also have their own interests. For example, organizations that make up a provincial reconstruction team (PRT) focus on immediate security, providing economic systems, providing basic services, and gaining support for representative government.<sup>16</sup> 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, if anyone, sign up to work for State in order to go to war. Perhaps State employees knew that austere environments or even some potentially hazardous working conditions might exist, but the veil of diplomatic immunity made the idea of having one's life threatened at all times completely incongruent with the assumed values of the organization.

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 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.

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## 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.<sup>17</sup> 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 important, comprehension of each other's roles, limitations, and capabilities.<sup>18</sup> Of these couplers, the understanding of each other's roles, limitations, and capabilities was deemed to be the most useful.

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.<sup>19</sup> For example, 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**

## NOTES

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