

Interagency:

Nice to Talk About... Hard to Do

by **David Eaton and Gus Otto**

"It's amazing what you can accomplish if you do not care who gets the credit."

Albert Einstein

The interagency concept is not a new paradigm, nor can it be considered the panacea to every problem set. Recent articles in the Simons Center's *InterAgency Journal* explain well the considerable challenges present within interagency operations and interagency education.¹ *InterAgency* briefs well. It presents a holistic approach to solving complex problems by integrating and synergizing efforts and expertise from across the whole-of-government. Sounds great doesn't it? Sure it does. The National Defense Strategy of 2008 articulates the interagency intent:

We will continue to work with other U.S. Departments and Agencies, state and local governments, partners and allies, and international and multilateral organizations to achieve our objectives. A whole-of-government approach is only possible when every government department and agency understands the core competencies, roles, missions, and capabilities of its partners and works together to achieve common goals.²

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Despite all the talk and insistence on tackling problems using an interagency approach, issues still plague the overall effectiveness of interagency partnerships. For example, in his article, “Team of Rivals: Building Civil-Military Synergy in the Interagency,” Jeffrey S. Han identifies several enduring interagency non congruencies: “A majority of the civilian U.S. government representatives at the embassy had a difficult time understanding the role of military personnel assigned to a country

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outside a combat zone.”³ And Han accurately points out that “after the WikiLeaks scandal, the State Department removed access to all of its diplomatic cables from the secure Defense Department SIPRNet.⁴ He also notes U.S. policymakers are well aware of interagency dysfunction stating: “Senator Claire McCaskill (D-MO.), a critic of Iraq war policy, said that interagency cooperation was an ‘utter, abject failure’ and that government divisions worked at cross-purposes, forming a ‘circular firing squad’.”⁵

There is no shortage of anecdotal and scholarly efforts scrutinizing the efficacy of interagency cooperation. Often within these literary stabs comes the recommendation or statement asking, “Why don’t we just legislate interagency like we did for jointness in the Goldwater-Nichols Act?” In “Is it Time for an Interagency Goldwater-Nichols Act?” Sean Roche argues several possible architectural courses of action, both evolutionary and revolutionary in legislative nature, toward a Goldwater-Nichols Act II-type solution. He concludes:

Adopting portions of the GNA [Goldwater-Nichols Act], passing legislations to reinvent the CSO [Bureau of Conflict and Stabilization Operations], and enforcing this legislation would lead to the emergence of an operational level for planning and action to provide the interagency, for the first time, the ability to reconcile policy decisions with the necessary action to achieve them.⁶

There are places where the U.S. government is deliberately integrating and synchronizing efforts across the federal, state, local, and multinational domains, but few where such efforts are working well. The dominance of organizational culture and parochial management emanating from constrained resources are hindrances to achieving truly effective interagency partnerships.

Interagency History, Culture, Evolution and Change

There are numerous examples of interagency failures. Some of the more recent, highly-visible failures question the need for interagency. At the federal level of the U.S. government, agency versus agency rivalries have existed since their creation. For example, on June 13, 1942, President Franklin Roosevelt signed Executive Order 69 transferring the existing office of Coordinator of Intelligence to the Office of Strategic Services (OSS) (the prelude to today’s Central Intelligence Agency). Executive Order 69 also appointed William “Wild Bill” Donovan as Director of Strategic Services.⁷ During World War II, the OSS collected and analyzed strategic information required by the War and Navy Departments and planned and operated such special services as may be directed by those departments.⁸ This new office and appointment was not received well by either the Army or Navy and, more importantly, loathed by the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI). The FBI, established in 1908, was a powerful and well-established institution. FBI Director J. Edgar

Hoover personally disliked Donovan and the idea of OSS, and with the strength of the FBI, he actively subverted Donovan and his OSS organization throughout the duration of the war. In *Wild Bill Donovan*, Douglas Waller, describes Hoover's level of dislike for Donovan:

The sleaziest attack came from J. Edgar Hoover, whose Federal Bureau of Investigation had spied on Donovan and his OSS as if they were Nazi agents...[Hoover] had an FBI agent pass along to Truman a vicious rumor that Donovan was sleeping with his daughter-in-law, Mary.⁹

Needless to say the OSS-FBI relationship languished. Similarly the military Service attitudes towards OSS were less than cordial throughout WWII.

Today relationships between CIA and FBI are significantly improved. That is not to say the improvement and changes to policy to better enable the interagency partnership over time have not come without challenges

Are interagency partnerships more likely to be formed because of orders from a higher headquarters or as an extension of stakeholder friendships and mutually favorable relationships? Which partnership is more likely to be effective? Some argue a main reason for interagency collaboration and, at times, the interagency ineptitude of today resulted from the findings and recommendations of the 9/11 Commission. Within the 9/11 Commission Report Executive Summary, several findings and recommendations suggest enhancing the interagency approach, for instance:

- Determine, with leadership from the President, guidelines for gathering and sharing information.
- Make homeland security funding contingent on the adoption of an incident command system to strengthen teamwork in a crisis, including a regional approach.

- Build unity of effort across the U.S. government.
- The “need to know” should be replaced with a system of “the need to share.”¹⁰

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Understandably some organizations, like people, need a crisis as a catalyst for real change. As a result of the horrible effects of the attacks of 9/11, agencies were directed to move toward interagency as a perennial model rather than one suited for addressing crisis situations, with the hope of getting ahead of the enemy and achieving better outcomes in the future.

It cannot be understated that agencies were directed toward an interagency approach rather than experiencing a natural evolution of relationships into true partnerships. Each organization or stakeholder entering into the interagency partnership has its own culture and is uneasy with other organizational cultures. In *Organizational Culture and Leadership*, Edgar H. Schein, a leading expert in organizational culture states: “The most useful way to think about culture is to view it as the accumulated shared learning of a given group, covering behavioral, emotional, and cognitive elements of the group members’ total psychological functioning.”¹¹

Could these agency-centric attitudes entering into a prescribed interagency partnership, each adding its own expertise and capabilities toward solving complex problems be considered a positive synergy rather than a risk-filled negative? Is the glass half-empty or half-full? Does each agency add to the combined interagency collective capacity or

only contribute to the clashing of cultures. If we believe the glass is half full, can we support it?

History more often paints the interagency clashing cultures rather than advancing efficiency. Correspondingly, the various personalities and cultures within an interagency partnership are more likely to be incongruent rather than analogous. For example, not unlike the early conflicts between OSS and FBI, similar culture and attitudinal clashes continue among law enforcement agencies and other local, state, and federal agencies. While there is no active organizational subterfuge, the sharing of information, jurisdictional authorities, and the cloak of investigation are among the regular impediments to true interagency cooperation.

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However, we must first consider what the interagency model asks law enforcement agencies to do. Interagency asks law enforcement to move away from their traditional approach and into an uncomfortable and risky partnership with little upfront benefit. The law enforcement officer and agency believe they take all the risk, do all the work, and are evaluated on the number of arrests and conviction rates. Additionally, they believe sharing their hard-earned information within the interagency approach may risk confidential sources and important prosecutions may be jeopardized. Very little evidence exists to validate this fear. Indeed, a greater good can be achieved with an interagency and sharing approach. However, the interagency approach asks law enforcement to share what they risked their lives and worked hard for. In return the interagency promises and delivers very little. For example, the interagency

construct gains valuable insight derived from law enforcement. They then exploit it, analyze it, and develop a classified, comprehensive product that cannot be shared with the originator in the law enforcement community.

William J. Davis, Jr., in “Why Can’t We All Just Get Along: Overcoming Personal Barriers to Inter-organizational Effectiveness,” identifies with Edgar Schein and states: “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.”¹²

This assertion is certainly not a revelation, and yet its truth remains hard to overcome regardless of how much one believes in the interagency concept. Why must an effort within the interagency be based on setting aside or compromising personal or organizational beliefs? Why not change the narrative and expectations of interagency partners and embrace the various approaches and beliefs recognizing they are value added. One does not need to fully understand a culture or point of view to respect it and accept it as valid. Diversity of beliefs, diversity of culture, and diversity in what can be accepted as right within the interagency is its strength and not its weakness.

On February 11, 2014, in an interview with CNN Chief National Security Correspondent James Sciutto, Chief of Staff of the Army General Raymond T. Odierno answered a question related to the U.S. Army moving into the future:

Well, it is interesting. Now, the one thing—so the one thing I will say is the one thing I think we’ll see in future warfare is a couple of things. And you’re aware of this, but I don’t really—it would have to be something very grave for us to do something completely independent. I really believe everything we do, it’ll be done in a joint context, obviously, an interagency,

intergovernmental, and on a multinational context. So I think that's how we're going to do things in the future.¹³

There it is again! Vociferous advocacy from the highest levels of the Army for the interagency approach. The interagency approach is not going away nor should it. Despite our nation's highest leaders' advocacy for the interagency, does lower leadership buy-in exist elsewhere at agency and institutional levels? Does your organizational leadership buy into the interagency? If not, what's the "so what"?

Organizational culture and architecture are two reasons leaders resist the interagency model. For instance, is organizational staffing and budgeting capable of supporting an interagency construct? Is existing building space architecture adequate or is expansion or modifications necessary? Can present information technology support the blending of different and varying levels of required access and security? If the answer is "no" to any of these questions, are we still moving forward and by whose authority, under whose direction? And by the way, how are we going to pay for all the necessary modifications?

Furthering hindering leadership buy-in for interagency partnerships is parochial fiefdom management—the attitude that in a declining resource environment the best option is to hold on to what we have and hope we survive the next round of cuts. In fact, the promotion system rewards this behavior. At any mention of interagency partnerships, organizations or its leaders only hear the word "change," and change is harder than the status quo. Some argue any change during economic volatility can spell demise. Additionally, leaders could be thinking a move toward interagency might limit their access to top stakeholders. An example that demonstrates this rationale is in the creation of the Office of the Director of National

Intelligence. This "unifying effort" was one of several directed changes resulting from the 9/11 Commission. As a result, CIA was, at best, not warm to the idea of a separate Office of the Director of National Intelligence, and like Hoover years before, actively challenged the office. Subsequently, the creation of the Office of the Director of National Intelligence caused much confusion throughout the intelligence community, impacted access and influence with the President, and only recently reached the level of efficacy for which it was created.

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Leadership resistance to an interagency partnership can also emerge from questions of uncertainty on authorities. What authority will I and my organization have over personalities not from within my own organization? Will I or my organization be reduced in responsibility or scope? What authorities will other organizations have over my own people? What are or what will be the supervision and rating chains? Will I or any other of my people be "matrixed" into a nebulous existence within the interagency partnership? Are there statutes and other legalities that must be addressed? Are memorandums of understanding or memorandums of agreement already present that clarify these questions, or do we need to create and codify them before we even begin the interagency partnership? These are very important questions that deserve viable and accountable answers.

A fresh start to answering the interagency conundrum could be setting aside the requirement to understand, subjugate, or change

the aspects of the varying beliefs and cultures within the interagency and simply agree to respect the diversity of all.

In his book *Organizational Change Theory and Practice*, W. Warner Burke, a recognized expert in organizational culture and change, asserts “you don’t change culture by trying to change culture.”¹⁴ He further explains: “Culture is ‘the way we do things around here’ and concerns deeply held beliefs, attitudes and values. Taking a direct, frontal approach to changing values is fraught with difficulty, resistance, and strong human emotion.”¹⁵

It could be argued the 9/11 Commission Report, in its admonishments and directed recommendations to government agencies, though well-intended, attempted to direct

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culture change and, as a consequence, stoked the perennial fires of interagency discourse. Nonetheless, interagency dissonance (and unique expertise within its diversity) can and should be harnessed into a bigger cultural and psychosocial equation focused on individual and organizational attitudinal shift toward a true appreciation of the interagency approach.

Interagency collaborations can and do work better than any blending of agency silos of excellence ever could. It worked in tactical fusion centers in Iraq and Afghanistan during the most crucial and dangerous of circumstances and can work well in more steady-state military and domestic efforts. Importantly, interagency partnerships can and do work at all local, state, federal, and municipal levels, and it all starts with

respect toward all members of the partnership. Can it blatantly be stated interagency works? Some of the why behind such a bold statement starts with the current workforce. For example, many of those working within the U.S. intelligence community started working there after the attacks on 9/11. In general, they are younger, well educated, well-traveled, and not personally encumbered by some of the negative characteristics of deep-seated organizational culture. Additionally, interagency collaboration works because “you don’t know what you don’t know.” You start to find out what you do not know when the interagency partners enable those learning opportunities. More and more, problem sets such as combating transnational organized crime are global in scope, and the interagency model fosters the relationships that aid in the understanding of existing statute, jurisdiction, and authorities.

Examples where people and their organizations are achieving this attitudinal shift toward interagency as the model vice the exception can be seen in an effort led by the Texas Department of Public Safety. Even with leadership buy-in, adequate resources, and the best of intentions, achieving true interagency is dynamic and remains hard to do and harder to maintain.

Over the past few years the State of Texas has been in the national spotlight during several high visibility events. Examples include the recent migrant surge across the U.S. southern border, the 2009 and later 2014 Fort Hood shootings, and the ongoing effort to stem the flow of drugs and violence into the U.S. from Mexico.

Captain Jaeson Jones from the Texas Department of Public Safety 2014, guest lecturer to the U.S. Army’s Combined Arms Center’s Command and General Staff College, shared the following insights in a June 5, 2014 Fort Leavenworth Lamp article:

First, it is not just the sharing of information but the persistent person-to-person collaboration that makes the difference between “talking” interagency and actually “doing” the interagency approach identifying and solving problems.

Second, it all starts with trust. Start with small projects and exchanges and build trust between stakeholders.

Third, it’s not the mission or vision statement that makes the interagency—it’s people. From the top leaders down to individuals in each organization, it is the day-to-day and face-to-face due diligence that enables true interagency cooperation. It makes no difference if people are from the local state or federal level. Leaders must embrace, embed, insist on and reward the interagency partnership. Stakeholders at all levels need to find ways to incorporate and institutionalize the interagency approach within their day-to-day activities.

Fourth, an interagency approach is more an attitude toward a new way of doing business than a capitulation. Interagency work is hard work. It’s a long-term persistent uphill battle against existing personal and organizational comfort zones, fortified paradigms and declining resources. Once interagency cooperation is established, the relationships need constant attention and reintroductions resulting from changes in leaders and missions. The attitude must be interagency—it is hard but the benefits make it worth the efforts.

Finally, interagency enables everyone and every agency to become better at what they do, what the Department of Defense calls “synergy.” Despite the upstart costs in manpower, personal egos and institutional prestige—interagency works and by doing so more organizations are successful and more mission are accomplished.¹⁶

Conclusion

Being on the ground together is paramount. Operational tempo, schedules, and technology can distract from the interagency process; however, being there in person speaks volumes toward commitment and trust. In his graduation speech to Command and General Staff Officer Course class 2014-01, Commanding General of the Combined Arms Center at Fort Leavenworth Lieutenant General Robert Brown emphasized several aspects of trust and teamwork: “This is a complex environment out here that demands cooperation and collaboration to succeed... If we don’t work together, we are going to fail.”¹⁷ Trust is the foundation of all relationships and interagency partnerships especially so. Relationships are strengthened through shared experiences. Trust one another and start with small efforts and manage expectations with hard but constructive honesty.

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Show up every time with something you can contribute to the overall effort. Be willing to break away from your own organizational paradigms and adapt others. An example from Texas Department of Public Safety was a legacy of over-reliance on the 1930 Uniform Crime Report. Today’s operational and criminal environment in and around Texas is not accurately captured in the Uniform Crime Report and does not accurately reflect all the data and nuance relating to criminal activity. The Department of Public Safety adapted

and now uses several variations of data and reporting to collect, analyze, assess, and respond to all safety-related activities throughout Texas and neighboring states. Send the right people to represent your organization; send the best and you get the best, send the worst and everyone knows it. Take the time to properly vet the people that will represent your organization. Send the people into the working groups who understand the importance of the interagency approach and ensure, when the timing is right, those with decision-making authority are in the room. Nothing says “we don’t care about this effort” louder than a liaison officer or working group member saying, “I have to take this information back to my higher for a decision.” Interagency partnerships, not unlike personal relationships, are better if initiated and maintained through a natural outpouring and shared interests and outcomes.

Interagency successes are not like single organization successes. The attitudinal shift needed for personal and organizational expectation management in this arena is “success for one is success for all.” The majority of time no single individual or organization will be able to stand up and say, “We did this and we should get all of the credit, we should be allocated more resources or we should be more in charge of this whole effort.” When interagency participants change within the partnership, it is crucial for these reintroductions to be on a personal as well as professional level. And nothing says the interagency partnership is over louder than failing to backfill a vacant working group partner when he or she changes out.

The interagency approach enables synergy at every level but can be costly. Recruitments, evaluations, and promotions driven by collaborative success will help codify the concept of synergy and therefore make “the juice worth the squeeze.” **IAJ**

NOTES

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