

Five Lessons for Strengthening Interagency Relationships

by *Thomas M. Kreutzer*

Most Americans know Okinawa only through the lens of history. Students of modern geopolitics, however, understand that in addition to being a tropical paradise the island plays host to members of the American military who honor the nation's treaty obligations to Japan, while helping to ensure peace and stability in the Asia/Pacific region. The Department of Defense (DoD) is well represented on the island. All four branches of the armed forces are present, as is the Department of State via its Consulate General near the prefectural capital of Naha. Naturally, in line with its different role in the alliance and its different relationship with the people of Okinawa, each of these organizations runs its own public affairs office.¹

The Public Affairs Office at Consulate General Naha as it exists today was established in the 1990s. Its primary mission is to explain U.S. policies, while presenting American society in all its complexity so that others can understand the context of U.S. actions. In addition, it creates and administers educational and cultural exchange programs to increase understanding between the people of Japan and the U.S. To accomplish this, the consulate's public affairs office must maintain strong ties with both the Okinawan community and its interagency partners. It has, over the years, been extremely successful in this regard.

As a relatively new public affairs officer tasked with managing such a solid program, I initially assumed that there would be little I could do to improve upon the many successes of my predecessors. That assumption, however, was wrong. Over the course of my three years on Okinawa, I learned that individuals, even ones as inexperienced as I had been at the outset of my assignment, can have a real impact on even the strongest of programs. That is because most formal, professional relationships, especially interagency relationships, are actually driven by personal relationships.

Thomas M. Kreutzer is a career Foreign Service Officer currently serving as Foreign Policy Advisor to the Commander, U.S. 7th Fleet in Yokosuka, Japan. Kreutzer has served as a Consular Officer at the U.S. Embassy in Kingston Jamaica, Chief of American Citizen Services at the U.S. Consulate General Osaka-Kobe, and Public Affairs Officer for the U.S. Consulate General in Naha, Okinawa. He holds an MMAS from the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College and a Bachelor of Arts from of Washington State University.

This article details some of the many ways in which I worked to strengthen the interagency community during my time in Okinawa. Astute readers will note that the public affairs community on the island is small in comparison to other interagency environments, and that all of the elements are primarily focused on helping to explain American policy and actions to the Japanese public. I have since gone on to use many of the same methods to help build solid interagency relationships during follow-on assignments. I believe certain fundamentals are universal. The intent of this article is to spur thought and discussion on the subject of interagency relationships and cause others to bring their own considerable talents to bear on the subject.

Lesson One: Actively Develop Your Counterparts' Staff Members

The Department of State (State), like the U.S. military, frequently rotates its officers among assignments, and, as a result, it takes more than a few months to build a network of strong, dependable contacts. Fortunately, no one starts from scratch. Local staff members, usually foreign nationals who are hired locally and remain with the mission for the duration of their careers, are incredibly important to State's overseas missions. Usually well-educated and well-connected, they help new officers navigate the environment, introduce them to the right people, and serve as the institutional memories of the organization.

Anyone who has worked with local staff understands just how important it is to a mission. The best officers are constantly on the lookout for ways to develop the members of their local staff because they know that, done right, the extra investment builds institutional strength that pays dividends for the mission over the long term. It is a symbiotic relationship. By helping staff members develop to their fullest potentials, officers help themselves and their missions.

What they often fail to think about, however, is the fact that they can also help build the skills, abilities, and reputations of the people who serve on interagency colleagues' staffs as well.

The concept may seem foreign. The development of a counterparts' staff is, after all, generally outside of their purview, and because they seldom work directly with them, they rarely think about them. They often serve as note-takers or observers, blend into the background, and are easily overlooked. Given their true importance, however, they deserve a seat at the table, and, in the interest of interagency institution building, public affairs officers should be thinking of ways to bring them to the fore.

In Okinawa, my office instituted a program called the "Study Meeting." It began as a series

Local staff members, usually foreign nationals who are hired locally and remain with the mission for the duration of their careers, are incredibly important to State's overseas missions.

of lectures for members of the local media, and the program proved so popular that it soon became a quarterly event. The Consulate's public affairs office would select a topic, request a speaker, and organize the event. My contribution was to expand the program by inviting interagency colleagues and their staff members to attend as well. I had two reasons for doing this: (1) additional exposure to members of the media would help my counterparts build stronger relationships with the local reporters, and (2) helping counterpart staff members develop their own relationships with reporters further strengthened the interagency effort on Okinawa. Those seats at the table allowed the members of my colleagues' staff to become full participants in the meeting, and the interactions

they had with the speaker and their counterparts in the media added to the success of the program

Over time, continued invitations to the Consulate's programs had another benefit as well. It gave the members of my staff a chance to see and learn about their interagency counterparts, and soon people who had previously been only peers became friends. In turn, those friendships led to better communication and a more cohesive interagency community that could be called upon to mobilize when agencies needed special assistance.

Finding balance is an art, but done right, awards motivate people to do their very best and builds their reputations among their peers.

Lesson Two: Use Awards to Develop Interagency Ties

Awards are a sensitive subject. In some agencies, awards are so preciously guarded that a person may see one or two over the course of an entire career, while other agencies print so many they are as worthless as Confederate money. Finding balance is an art, but done right, awards motivate people to do their very best and builds their reputations among their peers.

Awards given across interagency boundaries can be doubly difficult. To begin with, unless it has been agreed upon in advance through a memorandum of understanding, there is usually no awards committee to vet a nomination, no money to award, and, usually, no way to add an interagency award to a person's employee record. Additionally, some managers may balk at having their employees receive awards they had little input into writing.

However, interagency awards can be an important tool in building strong interagency teams. Awards can be official, which usually

means coordinating with one's interagency colleagues to establish a formal process, or unofficial such as certificates of appreciation that can be made in-house and passed to the awardee's supervisor. Because they are seldom expected, I find that, despite the fact that they carry no money or other agency-specific benefits, these awards can carry a great deal of weight with the people who receive them. How you make the award, however, is important.

In Okinawa, I used awards to thank interagency colleagues and their staff members for significant contributions to agency programs. Signed by the Consul General, the award became a visible token of my office's appreciation and helped to build a person's reputation. To give the Consulate's awards real weight, the awards were always for a specific contribution to a specific program that truly went above and beyond what was expected.

I presented an award by making an office call on the awardee's supervisor and spoke in very specific terms about why the Consulate had decided to issue an award. Usually, my counterpart had been involved in the program as well, which is why his or her personnel had been tasked with lending their support, and, in every case, they agreed to accept the award, most often passing it along to their staffs during a meeting or a general awards ceremony.

These awards enhanced the reputations of those who received them and served to further strengthen already close interagency ties.

Lesson Three: Facilitate Staff to Staff Interaction

Most people understand the power of inclusiveness in their personal lives, but with schedules filled with meetings, projects, and deadlines, it is something that is easily overlooked in official roles. Smart people know, however, that personal relationships matter as much in their professional lives as they do in private and make it a priority to cultivate

personal professional relationships. Good leaders expand upon this by also making it a priority to help their staff members create personal professional relationships as well. Done right, this can dramatically strengthen interagency relationships.

Agencies are large, unwieldy organizations that often do not fit together easily. Personal relationships can make all the difference. The stronger the personal relationships, the more naturally information flows between organizations and, as we all know, information flow is the key to real interagency cooperation. Sometimes, creating the right environment for this to flourish can be as simple as doing something nice.

One of our important contacts with the U.S. Marine Corps' Public Affairs Office was the Okinawan spouse of an American service member. Although she was not an especially high ranking member of their team, she was someone with whom my office frequently worked in order to coordinate schedules and arrange official meetings. This woman's son attended one of the DoD high schools on the island. When he heard that my office was facilitating the visit of NASA Administrator Charles Bolden, astronaut, aviator, and Marine Corps Major General, to an Okinawan high school, he told his mother he was envious of the Japanese students. She casually passed those remarks on to my senior staff member who mentioned them to me.

Our mission limited how my office could use resources. We could, however, invite a number of Americans to representational events. After looking at the guest list for the Bolden reception, we found we were able to extend a personal invitation to our contact, her son, and a small group of Okinawan students. This "personal invitation," strengthened the bond between our contact and my senior staffer. People learned that we did more than just talk about helping interagency colleagues, when we could, we took action as well.

Lesson Four: Every Agency is an Asset

Upon landing in Okinawa, I was surprised to discover that DoD actually had five different public affairs offices on the island. Given the military presence there, the first four were expected. It was the fifth office, the DoD Dependents' Schools (DoDDS) that came as a surprise.

DoDDS is an unusual interagency partner for a consulate or an embassy.

DoDDS is an unusual interagency partner for a consulate or an embassy. Very few of the countries in which State works have military bases with large populations of American students that can be used to support intercultural exchange programs and, as a result, the interagency potential often goes untapped. DoDDS, however, turned out to be a wonderful partner, and as our relationship developed, I turned to them frequently for help. The educators and professional staff were all top notch and always willing to engage. The trick, though, was ensuring that the programs offered enough educational content to make it worth their while.

Cultural exchange through sports is a common method of youth outreach, and when I arrived on Okinawa there were already successful programs built around basketball and baseball. Most schools, both American and Okinawan, already had working teams, complete with professional coaches and good facilities, and adding a cross-cultural exchange tournament at the end of the season was a good capstone to the regular intermural seasons. But, after looking at the students who participated in these programs, I realized that we were missing out on other avenues of exchange.

Because the main focus of the State's

public affairs efforts must be directed toward the local population, including American citizens in programs is always subject to detailed regulations. The types of programs and the numbers of participants must be carefully considered, and if a program skews away from cultural-exchange, it is not valid for the State's purposes. From the DoDDS's perspective, it is the opposite. Cultural exchange is a good thing, but if a program skews away from education, then it is not valid for its purposes either. Careful planning and compromise are necessary.

The ultimate goal of interagency cooperation should be to create a synergistic effect in which the combined power and reach of all U.S. government programs in a given area exceeds what each could accomplish individually.

The programs that Consulate Naha and DoDDS created were similar to the existing sports programs but focused, instead, on the arts. Although competitive art as a team sport is unknown in the U.S., it is common in Japanese schools, and it was a good avenue of approach. We decided to hold a graphic arts contest known as a comic or "Manga" contest, in which groups of five or six artists collaborate to create a work of art that addresses a specific theme. At the end of the day, the works are judged and prizes awarded.

In order to make this happen, DoDDS needed to find art students who were willing to participate. After publicizing the event in art classes, the high schools fielded two teams to compete against students from ten Okinawan schools. These programs were a big hit with an underserved demographic. And it would not have been possible if interagency partners in DoDDS had not been willing to share its most precious

resource, its students.

Lesson Five: Aim for Synergy

The ultimate goal of interagency cooperation should be to create a synergistic effect in which the combined power and reach of all U.S. government programs in a given area exceeds what each could accomplish individually. On Okinawa, the various public affairs offices proved to be excellent interagency partners and frequently shared their resources in pursuit of shared goals. The military had facilities and manpower, my office had prestige, solid contacts with influential members of the local community, and an experienced staff who had an almost uncanny organizational ability.

Perhaps the best example of this was the Okinawa/American High School Basketball Tournament. It was an enormous event to organize and coordinate and involved a steering committee with members of my staff, the Marine Corps Public Affairs Office, the Marine Corps Morale Welfare and Recreations Office, the Department of Defense Schools, and the United Services Organization. For many Okinawans, this was one of the few opportunities they had to meet and mix with the Americans on the island and visit an active military base.

Conclusion

The high level of interagency cooperation that existed on Okinawa was already well established by the time I arrived in 2007. I assumed leadership of an office that was well connected to both the Okinawan media and interagency counterparts and also benefited from a local staff that was highly placed, well connected, and fluent in both the Okinawan and American cultures. Many of the small improvements my office was able to make in the interagency relationships on the island were only possible because of the solid foundations that my local staff and predecessors had laid.

While Okinawa offers a unique interagency

situation, in which several organizations are tied together in pursuit of a common mission, I believe that the lessons I learned while serving there are applicable across the full spectrum of government. After leaving Okinawa in 2010, I used many of the same techniques I used in Okinawa to help found two programs at State's Buffalo Passport Agency, both of which required a great deal of interagency contact and support,

Managing interagency relationships is something that everyone in government service should think about. I hope other interagency partners will consider some of these programs as starting points to examine their own programs and their connections to the larger, interagency communities. We are always stronger when we stand together. **IAJ**