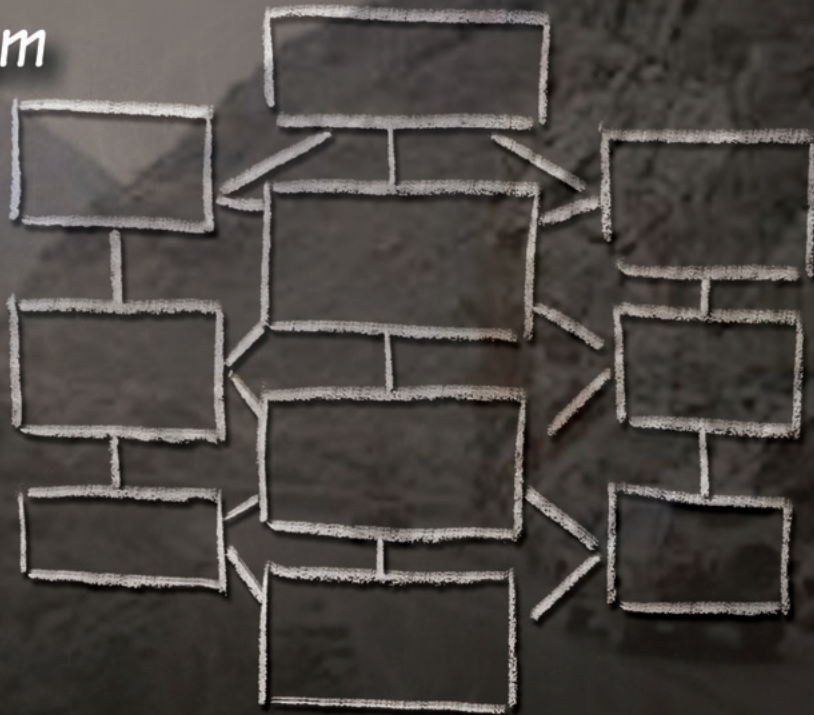


Cross-Functional Team Staff Structure in the Afghanistan Counterinsurgency



A converted yellow gymnasium on the north side of the Kabul International Airport is headquarters to the International Security Assistance Force Joint Command (IJC). Inside is a labyrinth of hallways with multicolored wires climbing the walls. The rooms are large with rows of long desks, computer screens and scattered papers. There are no privacy dividers. Staff officers sit inches apart conversing, making and refining plans, building briefs, translating ideas, and turning guidance into tasks and intent that become actions on the ground.

The general officers work in similar conditions: There are no private offices with secretaries, aides or military assistants. Like their staff officers, the generals sit in a large room around a horseshoe-shaped series of tables in what is called the Situational Awareness Room. The only difference is that they enjoy a few feet of space to themselves.

By BG Wayne W. Grigsby Jr.,
LTC Mark E. Johnson,
LTC Ed Ledford,
LTC John Callery,
LTC Paul P. Smith Jr.,
COL Michael Rothstein and
MAJ Gail Fisher

At International Security Assistance Force Joint Command Headquarters in Kabul, Afghanistan, cross-functional teams (CFTs) work in "collaborative rooms."



U.S. Army/LTC Ed Ledford

For six to 12 to 15 months—for some, longer—staff officers work 16 to 18 hours a day in these collaborative rooms, directing operations, sharing information, coordinating and planning with their counterparts in the Afghan National Security Forces and international community to develop and refine plans and concepts to synchronize and implement counterinsurgency operations in Afghanistan.

From the Beginning

In June 2009, GEN Stanley McChrystal, the new commander of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), initiated a top-down review of the coalition force, its strategy, how it functioned, and what needed to change in order to stem the insurgent advance and seize the initiative. About the same time, a small group of staff officers gathered at the U.S. Forces-Afghanistan (USF-A) headquarters in Kabul to get ready for what promised to be a most-demanding task: Design a highly functional staff structure for a NATO-led multinational operational command headquarters that would command and control coalition forces and partner with Afghan national security forces to regain the initiative in the counterinsurgency and to bring peace and stability to the Afghan people.

In designing this structure, the staff was instructed to throw out "the way we've always done it" thinking. Instead, they would determine—based on an understanding of the insurgency, Afghanistan and counterinsurgency operations—how the staff should be structured to best support the troops on the ground, down at the district level and below, where, in the future commander's view, the coalition would succeed in protecting the Afghan people and helping them beat the insurgency.

"It wasn't a matter of change for change's sake," one of the staff members remembers. "It was the fact that what we have been doing has not been working. So, let's start

from scratch and see what we come up with. If we came up with the same thing, then that would have been fine, if that is what we thought would work best," he said. "We had the freedom to design something that would respond to the top-down-guidance and bottom-up-refinement imperative of this counterinsurgency in Afghanistan. Remember, this was not a discreet effort but part of a larger revision of the coalition strategy and a way of fighting the counterinsurgency. Everything was being reexamined. Nothing was sacred."

Agreeing that a traditional functional and combined staff structure would be too slow and cumbersome to act quickly and responsively, the group devised four cross-functional teams (CFTs) to flatten the staffing process, expand information sharing to the greatest extent possible and promote better, more efficient processes, collaboration and communication. The four IJC CFTs were: Current Operations, Future Operations, Future Plans and the Information Dominance Center.

In the IJC CFT model, officers from the various functional staff sections not only sit side by side with operational planners but also work directly for the CFT chiefs, all of whom work for either the deputy chief of staff for joint operations or, as is the case for Future Plans, the deputy chief of staff for plans and policy.

Rather than providing situational awareness to their functional staff leads and coming together for operational planning meetings, as necessary, they would be full-time, permanent members of the CFTs.

What CFTs Bring to the Fight

The ability of the CFT to communicate and share information internally and with higher and lower echelons more quickly and accurately is an important advantage. Perhaps the biggest advantage of a cross-functional team is the shared situational understanding and institutional knowledge that every member brings to every plan, thus accelerating the planning process while improving the quality of the product. No matter the skill set or function a staff member brings to the group, everyone in the room is directly or indirectly involved in the planning.

At any given time, the CFT can be working on as many as 20 tasks or projects simultaneously, each led by a single planner or team of planners. The rapid pace and synchronized collaboration of a well-performing CFT room is at times analogous to a factory floor with all members of the team knowing exactly what their tasks are and what and

The authors held various command positions within the International Security Assistance Force Joint Command (IJC) Future Operations Cross-Functional Team (CFT) when this article was written. BG Wayne W. Grigsby Jr. was chief of the IJC Future Operations CFT. LTC Mark E. Johnson was chief of intelligence plans. LTC Ed Ledford was a speechwriter and chief of the IJC Command Operational Engagement Cell. LTC John Callery was the chief of logistical plans. LTC Paul P. Smith Jr. was the deputy chief. COL Michael Rothstein was the chief of the Activity Synchronization Team. MAJ Gail Fisher was the lead stability officer within the Activity Synchronization Team.

Proximity allows each member of the future-operations CFT to communicate and share information internally and with higher and lower echelons rapidly and accurately.



U.S. Army/LTC Ed Ledford

when they need to input to produce the highest quality product. Unlike the factory floor, however, which typically is more linear, the CFT is a system, and staff members must listen and be aware of an enormous amount of information. They must think, evaluate and understand how new data might affect not only the task at hand but also one of any number of other ongoing tasks or projects.

Everyone on the staff needs to understand the operational environment, ideally knowing more about what is happening on the ground and what the host nation and its populace are thinking than does the opposing force and even, at times, the host nation itself. What the CFTs bring to the fight is a staff of functional experts working collaboratively and simultaneously to develop actionable plans in hours or minutes to get inside the insurgents' decision cycle.

We often take for granted the superior quality and training of our soldiers and our technological advantages, forgetting that the most important asset we have is our ability to think and adapt to our environment. We need to be smarter and more intellectually agile than the insurgents. CFTs bring together the breadth of experience of a staff that can quickly and effectively generate the products and plans the commander needs to make decisions.

Challenges

A CFT is only as good as its people and its leader. Perhaps the greatest challenge lies in building effective teams from diverse backgrounds in a coalition environment and then getting everyone moving and thinking in the same direction. In the IJC, the CFTs are composed of multinational coalition plans officers from Australia, the United Kingdom, Estonia, the Netherlands, Bulgaria, Poland, Turkey, Denmark, Germany, France, Italy, Spain and others. The majority are field-grade officers. Many speak the official NATO language, English, as a second language but often better than native English speakers. Their breadth of knowledge and experiences are invaluable.

With each CFT led by a colonel or brigadier general, a strong chief of staff (COS) is critical. As with traditional functional and combined staffs, there is a tendency for senior field-grade officers, even in CFTs, to look internally and view the world from the perspective of what tasks or projects *they* need to accomplish within a specified time rather than synchronizing their efforts. To avoid this pitfall, the COS deconflicts and manages all tasks according to priority. It would be fairly easy for CFTs to duplicate ef-

forts, especially on those tasks that do not neatly fall into general planning time horizons that differentiate between current and future operations and future plans. A strong, proactive chief preserves the integrity and synchronizes the planning of efforts.

Initially, one of the most significant challenges with the implementation of CFTs was getting staff sections to buy into the concept. The CFT, as the centerpiece of a command's staff structure, can be an uncomfortable shift from our formal education. No longer do we sit in offices and come together to plan and then return to our offices to write our staff estimates and operations orders. Now, junior and senior staff officers from a range of backgrounds and specialties sit in the same room and look, speak, cooperate and exchange information with each other on a continual basis. To many who grew up longing for that private office and space in which to think, the CFT concept is unsettling and disruptive. It takes time to adapt.

A Model for the Future

The decision to combine all functional expertise into CFTs—1,300 people from 34 countries—to streamline communication and expedite the military decision-making process was as innovative as it was a natural evolution. The handful of staff officers who walked into the gymnasium to design the floor plan of the new IJC headquarters did not have the luxury of time to cobble together a staff and develop the institutional understanding and situational awareness necessary to conduct military-civilian operations in a counterinsurgency environment.

The CFT concept is just one of many ways to build a corps-level headquarters staff—subordinate units, civilian counterparts, national and international nongovernmental organizations—with the mental and physical agility to learn from its Afghan partners and from each other.

The CFT concept can serve as a model for future commands and staffs that need to quickly flatten communication, increase situational awareness and allow the commander to make quick, informed decisions to get inside the insurgents' decision cycle. ★