

Withdrawing, Engaging, or Going Native

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Imagine you're preparing for deployment at the National Training Center. The male Observer Controller (OC) is wearing lipstick and mascara. Would you be distracted? Well, that is how Iraqi counterparts may feel when their American advisors swear or spit in front of them. In Iraqi society, spitting and swearing in front of people disrespects them.

Now imagine an OC with near perfect military bearing. To finish early, he wants to talk you through the validation lane rather than have you execute it. Would you question his professionalism and therefore his credibility as a trainer? Well, that's how Iraqi counterparts feel about advisors who have compromised on core values to pursue a path of comfort and least resistance rather than one of professional distinction.

The first example describes advisors who are withdrawn. The second describes advisors who have "gone native." Good advisors engage and accommodate Iraqi culture without compromising professional standards. They carefully balance the three building blocks of social conventions: Forms, Functions, and Meanings.

The American word "hello" is a form. It functions as a greeting. In meaning, it's nothing more than a sound for giving and getting attention. Greeting function in Arabic uses the form "*Asalamualaikum*" which means "peace to you." This form is more ritualized and remains connected to a belief-based meaning.

Forms are elements like language, customs, courtesies, holidays, food, clothes, and grooming. Forms have no function or meaning apart from a social context. They are external and are separate from one's core identity. I can use different forms in different contexts to communicate who I am without changing who I am. My friend who is a Marine knows about the form and function of Marine haircuts. However, the haircut does not make him a Marine, and when civilians get Marine haircuts, they stay civilians.

Meaning is the interpretation a society gives to a form. In Iraq, defilement adheres to skin licked by a dog, but honor shines from a face covered with whiskers. In America, if I fail to give up my seat to a pregnant woman on a crowded subway, it

means I am self-absorbed and rude. In this example: meaning = I am rude; form = offering my seat; function = consideration of others. Many meanings reflect core convictions that are built on character, beliefs and values.

Functions address social purposes like building esteem, creating community, creating accountability, maintaining integrity, enhancing status, and preserving honor.

Engaged advisors improve functions in the target society. They choose their forms to influence behaviors according to the local system for giving meaning to those forms. They motivate behavioral changes according to the beliefs and values in the foreign society without changing their own values and beliefs. They work creatively to conform in appearance without compromising in character and behavior.

Withdrawn advisors *reject both* forms and meanings. They accommodate neither appearance nor behavior. They care little for locally assigned meanings like how Iraqis feel about dog-licked skin or what they think about whiskers on a face. They are like the foreigner in America who stays seated on the crowded subway when an elderly woman boards.

"Gone Native" advisors *embrace both* forms and meanings uncritically. They both appear and behave like the people they are trying to influence. They don't just accommodate local values and beliefs. They actually implement and advocate them. For impact, they are like the foreigner in America who is a Muslim who goes clubbing in strip joints and bars. That immigrant has lost ability to advocate for pious moral standards as "gone native" advisors lose ability to represent professional values of the American Army. Influencing target society counterparts through their existing beliefs and values differs from embracing target society beliefs and values as one's own.

Military advisors try to enhance functions like pay systems, parts distribution, supply accountability, command and control, and mission planning. Having spurned local forms, withdrawn advisors cannot communicate. Having converted to local priorities, advisors who have gone native lose credibility and cannot motivate. By accommodating local forms to communicate their convictions, engaged advisors influence functions and change behaviors.