2-IA DIV MiTT Chaplain's Observations on Transition Team Dynamics
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For the past five months I have been a chaplain designated for providing religious support to small teams of soldiers embedded within Iraqi army, border, and police units around the city of Mosul in northern Iraq. These small teams, known as Transition Teams (TTs), face some unique challenges as they negotiate a fairly universal team building process. Here are some of my observations about these teams.

Overview

On well bonded and highly functioning teams, the work of the team as a whole exceeds what could be accomplished separately by each member, and most of the members are having positive cross-cultural influence on the host-nation units that they are advising. All of the members are both enthusiastic about their TT mission and about their friendships with one another.

The most poorly bonded and most poorly functioning teams are a liability in their sectors, and only two or three of their members are having a positive impact. The members intensely dislike one another and are extremely dissatisfied with both their TT mission and the Army. None of the members would ever return to a TT, and at least half of the members desire to leave the Army as soon as possible.

The majority of the transition teams fall between these extremes. They are moderately bonded and moderately functioning. They perform no better as a team than they would as separate individuals, and about half of their members are making significant positive impact on security operations. One or two of the members would favorably consider returning to TT duty, but most would not. One or two of the members are bitter and want to leave the Army as soon as possible.

Understanding and adjusting to the challenges faced by TTs, the process of team bonding, and the features present on well functioning teams versus the features present on poorly functioning teams can help TTs to become more effective, and help the Army keep talent for TTs.

Challenges

1. <u>Blurred Personal and Professional Relationships</u>

　　Throughout most of what I will call "Big Army" soldiers of different ranks routinely relate to each other professionally. However, soldiers holding different ranks generally avoid casual social relationships that would make them vulnerable to one another. Junior NCOs socialize with other junior NCOs, senior NCOs with senior NCOs, captains with captains, colonels with colonels, and so on. TTs, however, feature ranks from E-6 to O-6 on isolated ten to fifteen man teams. In this situation, maintaining interpersonal distance and privacy between leaders and subordinates becomes nearly impossible.

　　On teams with healthy dynamics, senior and junior leaders learn to relate as social equals while maintaining professional distance and respect.

　　Unhealthy dynamics emerge according to the following pattern. Senior leaders feel vulnerable. They create distance by communicating poorly, withholding information, and making decisions without input from their subordinates. Junior leaders observe personality traits and personal weaknesses in their senior leaders that are normally hidden. Then they often lose respect for them. Tension and cliques develop compounding the insecurity and resulting in spiraling negativity. Juniors accuse the leadership of hypocrisy. Seniors accuse the juniors of immaturity. Neither group responds positively to the other's needs.

2. <u>Rift Between Combat Experienced and Inexperienced</u>

　　Inevitably most teams include some members who have served in combat before and some who have not. Big Army intentionally looks for soldiers who haven't yet been on combat tours to put them on TTs. Often these are senior leaders.

　　On healthy teams, the combat experienced soldiers have patience with the inexperienced and recognize that their expertise is limited in some ways. The combat inexperienced soldiers respect the experienced ones and show they have listened to their advice.

　　On teams with unhealthy dynamics, the combat experienced feel superior and disrespect those without it. Combat inexperienced soldiers mask inferiority by projecting inadequacy onto others. They highlight faults while overlooking good qualities. When it coincides with a rift

between junior and senior leaders, the distance between the "haves" and "have-nots" with regard to combat experience increases tension and negativity.

3. <u>Unusual, Unclear, Incremental and Intangible Objectives</u>

Big Army rewards people who articulate and reach clearly quantifiable and measurable goals. Most of the people selected for TTs have demonstrated considerable achievement. They are familiar with and expect success. TT objectives are difficult to articulate and achieve. Results come slowly, depend heavily upon cooperation from host nation counterparts over whom teams have no command authority, and are difficult to measure. Team members often hold themselves (and are held by others) to unrealistic expectations. Big Army's desire to avoid subjective criteria hamstrings articulating objectives in incremental achievable terms. These conditions lead many soldiers on TTs to a crisis in self-perception and career development. Ensuing anxiety over self-worth and career progression causes team members to be impatient with one another.

Members on healthy teams help each other self-actualize in intangible ways. They affirm and approve of each other for faithfulness in lieu of success. They understand and reward the significance of what many in Big Army would consider to be mediocre achievements.

On struggling teams, the insecure members often try to avoid becoming aware of the feelings of failure, fear, and hostility that they would be experiencing due to a conflicted self-image. These repressed negative emotions then often bubble to the surface as overreactions to trivial matters (displacement) or hypercriticism of others (projection). Displacement and projection can lead to 1) vicious competitiveness like sabotaging the success of others, 2) inordinate attention to peripheral projects like a principle driven campaign for fairness, 3) withdrawal and isolation like excessive working out, and/or 4) regression to childish behaviors like temper tantrums. To maintain self-respect, the affected members often rationalize these dysfunctional behaviors by blaming others for creating conditions that make these behaviors inevitable.

4. <u>Unfulfilled Expectations</u>

TT members are told when they are being recruited and during training that the TT mission is the most important job being done in Iraq. They are told that support for TTs is a top Department of Defense priority. Once on the ground in the battle space of a maneuver

commander, TTs become like "red-headed step-children." Their sacrifice and work seems underappreciated. Their need for support and service seems treated like a distraction. Their work with host country counterparts creates an illusion of disloyalty. Their autonomy and isolation creates an illusion of lack of accountability. TTs formed internally by battle space commanders rarely receive top performing personnel.

The single biggest disappointment that nearly every team faces comes not from how they are treated by host nation counterparts but from how they are treated by other Americans.

Healthy teams take this disappointment in stride or even expect it. They find fulfillment independent of end-of-tour awards and blocks on evaluation reports that are checked by battle space commanders. They take pride in being "persecuted" and bind together with increased loyalty to one another and commitment to the mission.

On unhealthy teams, the members grow bitter and lose inspiration. They begin to act out according to the negative expectations held out for them.

5. Race and Gender Prejudice in Middle Eastern Culture

If Middle Eastern and Central Asian peoples tend to exhibit widespread racial hatred and gender prejudice among themselves, then it only makes that, when asked to deal with black and female soldiers, host-nation counterparts may or may not be able to restrain pre-conditioned racist and sexist feelings. Black soldiers and women on TTs valuably demonstrate American respect for human rights and diversity. TT leaders will do well to recognize that minority personnel face challenges and have advantages that are different from white soldiers.

Healthy teams recognize the special challenges faced by minorities and adjust accordingly in order to obtain an advantage. They may shift soldier-counterpart alignments to achieve the most productive interpersonal pairings, and they may modify cross-cultural performance expectations for minority soldiers.

Unhealthy teams will not recognize or accommodate this intercultural dynamic. They will hold minority soldiers to the same cross-cultural standards as non-minorities without recognizing the unique challenges and opportunities that minorities face in a Middle Eastern setting.

6. <u>Culture Shock</u>

When they arrive, TTs' emotions and expectations are high. Whatever goes up must come down. Coming down off of the emotional high usually corresponds with disappointment and unfulfilled expectations within the first two months. By the six-month mark, most team members are thoroughly disillusioned with some if not many aspects of their host nation's culture. The Big Army does a good job preparing team members for how people in specific foreign cultures behave, but it does a poor job of explaining why they behave that way. Good adjustment to being embedded within another culture and good communication across a cultural boundary require more than just familiarity with cultural differences. In order to motivate behavioral changes without clashing against underlying beliefs and values, team members must understand not just how their counterparts behave but also why they behave that way. Healthy teams brainstorm the challenges and discover ways to influence their host nation counterparts within their counterpart's system of values. Unhealthy teams either give up or keep on doing things that aren't working.

7. <u>Immersion Fatigue</u>

Immersing in a host nation context is one of the most physically and emotionally draining experiences a person can endure. It involves foreign language, poor hygiene, disagreeable food, bad smells, strange gestures, confusing interpersonal relationships, and all kinds of discomfort. Maximizing cross-cultural influence requires not only this sort of immersion, but also stooping down to a lifestyle among the host-nation counterparts that avoids inspiring envy. Recovering emotional and physical health requires occasionally escaping from these depressing conditions and this draining lifestyle.

Healthy teams find a battle rhythm that facilitates a high degree of extended immersion combined with short periods of escape and recovery. Healthy team supervision allows each team to find the rhythm that suits them best.

Unhealthy teams will avoid immersion as much as possible. They will commute to their counterparts only for business and mission purposes and will maintain a comfortable American lifestyle as much as possible.

Stages of Team Development

Just as TTs face challenges that are unique in the Army to them, they also endure a development process universal to small teams. The Christian outreach organization YWAM (Youth With A Mission), which sends out small short-term ministry teams, identifies four team building stages. They call these forming, storming, norming, and performing.

These stages precede productivity. Anticipating them helps to speed the process of reaching full potential. The stages can be cyclical. When team circumstances change (like moving the team to a new location, giving them a new mission, or changing the personnel composition) the process can start all over again. Sometimes the stages can be staggered within one team among different people. Sometimes a TT can go through their entire tour in Iraq without ever progressing beyond the storming stage. In this situation, individuals on the team may be able to accomplish good advisory work in spite of conditions on the team, but the team itself never functions to the degree that the work of the whole is greater than the sum of its parts.

1. Character of the Forming Stage

The forming stage features unclear expectations, superficial interactions, and positive expectations. This is an orientation and honeymoon period. Members are only just getting to know one another. They may be anxious but they are inevitably hopeful. Occasionally some members of the forming team may already know each other from prior experiences together. If their friendship begins including others, then they can accelerate team bonding. If their friendship becomes exclusive and isolates them from other members, then team bonding slows down.

2. Character of the Storming Stage

The storm in the storming stage comes from conflict over evolving task distribution, accountability structures, and interpersonal boundaries. "Storm" in the form of uncertainty and tension will prevail until the team develops stable routines in these three areas.

Some teams never progress beyond storming because they never reach stability with respect to tasks, structures, and boundaries. Just because a team experiences constant conflict, however, doesn't mean they are stuck in the storming stage. Frequent low-level conflict can be

healthy, and it is better than conflict avoidance which causes tensions to boil below the surface. Healthy conflict occurs in productive ways and results in progress and resolution. Collaboration to reach win-win solutions is better than compromise where both sides partially give in.

3. Character of the Norming Stage

Eventually teams reach a stage in relationships and routine that is normal for them. Life becomes predictable so members can be more relaxed even on teams where tension is high. On some teams, cohesion develops that leads to lasting commitments. Team building events and activities become part of the routine on well bonded teams. On other teams, interpersonal tension never goes away. Some teams develop routines for diffusing interpersonal tension while others develop patterns to avoid dealing with conflict so that it seethes beneath the surface.

4. Character of the Performing Stage

Once teams establish normalcy for routine, relationships, structure, and purpose, they begin accomplishing their mission. Healthy well bonded teams integrate member efforts according to abilities and capacities so that the impact of the team as a whole exceeds what could have been accomplished by each individual. Poorly bonded teams accomplish less in the performing stage as a team than they would be able to accomplish as separate individuals. Never-the-less, even poorly bonded teams in the performing stage do accomplish some missions and attain some objectives.

Practices Common to Well Adjusted Teams

In my overnights with twenty teams and visits to at least twenty-four, I have discovered some practices that appear common to well functioning teams. Whether these practices contribute to team health or merely result from it, I do not know.

1. Team Building Activities

Well bonded teams have team building activities. Some are doing weekly PT together. Others eat together. These teams have activities that are mandatory for the entire team, to include the senior leader. Some members may complain about these activities or complain that they'd

prefer something different, but that doesn't stop these activities from being a common feature to highly performing teams.

2. <u>Daily Hot Washes</u>

Well bonded teams have daily "hot washes." These are not morning meetings to establish the day's routine, but afternoon or evening meetings to evaluate and critique the day's events.

3. <u>Civil Affairs Projects</u>

Well bonded teams always seem to have some kind of civil affairs project that they are either preparing to do or have done.

4. <u>Atmosphere of Grace</u>

Well bonded teams seem to always have, what as a chaplain I would call an atmosphere of grace. Members on these teams seem willing to overlook offenses. They avoid nursing grudges. Members trust rather than second guessing their leaders. Leaders affirm and appreciate their followers. Leaders correct mistakes without questioning motives or criticizing personalities. Members readily admit mistakes without fear of being punished for them.

5. <u>Available and Engaged Leaders Who Lead</u>

On highly functioning teams the leaders live and work among and to the same conditions and standards as their followers at every rank. I have not found any teams in theater where the team chief becomes just another "one of the guys." On the other hand, on the well bonded teams that I have observed, the chiefs are not aloof and disconnected from the people who are following them.

6. <u>Leaders Committed to Integrity over Popularity</u>

Teams that stay out of trouble have leaders who resist pressure to become popular by compromising standards. Once compromise becomes accepted on standards in one area enforcing standards in all other areas becomes more difficult.

Elements Common to Poorly Adjusted Teams

In my travels, I have also discovered some features that are common to poorly functioning teams. Whether these elements contribute to team dysfunction or merely result from it, I also do not know.

1. <u>Designated Patients</u>

Under-performing and poorly bonded teams usually seem to have someone whom everyone on the team recognizes as a "problem child." Psychologists note that in families with hidden tension and relational problems, one child will often publicly act out. It seems simultaneously to be a way for the child subconsciously to reach out for help and for the family to project responsibility for its dysfunctions onto the child. TTs are more like large families than like "Big Army" units. The "designated patient" phenomenon seems to afflict poorly bonded TTs.

2. <u>Punitive atmosphere</u>

In contrast to the atmosphere of grace that I found to characterize well bonded teams, people on teams that are experiencing problems seem to have less patience with one another. Leaders seem more interested in punishment and making someone an example than they seem interested in development and rehabilitation. Followers routinely second-guess their leaders and habitually compare themselves to one another in order to discover times that they have been treated unfairly. Mental records of offenses accumulate in people's minds. Members and leaders quickly link offenses to motives and mistakes to incompetency.

3. <u>Pre-deployment Indications</u>

Without exception, every team that I have observed that is enduring serious relational problems in theater experienced indicators during training before they deployed. In every situation that I have observed, those problems got worse rather than better after they arrived in theater.

4. <u>Broader Rank Spectrum</u>

In general, teams with a broader range of rank seem to have more trouble bonding than teams where the rank distribution is more compressed.

Conclusion

Transition Teams face unique challenges while negotiating a universal bonding process. The unique challenges I have observed include: blurred personal and professional relationships; rift between combat experienced and inexperienced; unusual, unclear, incremental, and intangible objectives; unfulfilled expectations; race and gender prejudice in Middle Eastern culture; culture shock; and immersion fatigue. The stages of team bonding are: forming, storming, norming, and performing. Well bonded teams seem to exhibit the following features: team building activities, daily "hot washes," civil affairs projects, an atmosphere of grace, available and engaged leaders who lead, and leaders who enforce moral integrity. Poorly bonded teams seem to exhibit these features: "designated patients," punitive atmosphere, pre-deployment indications, and a broader rank spectrum.

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