Cultivating Good Will Amidst Hostility

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: The purpose of this research was to identify the skills of Good Strangers: military personnel who are successful in building trust in civilian populations. **Method:** Twenty-four soldiers and Marines were interviewed using a Cognitive Task Analysis method that relied on critical incidents. These interviews yielded 48 critical incidents. **Results and discussion:** Analysis of these incidents showed that soldiers and Marines with a Good Stranger mindset are alert to opportunities to build trust. They also depend on the skills of perspective taking, gaining voluntary compliance, and de-escalating situations.

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this project was to understand the skills required by military personnel to gain voluntary compliance from civilians, rather than relying so heavily on threats and intimidation. Historically, U.S. military personnel were trained to be warfighters engaged against traditional national forces. They were prepared in the strategies and tactics of the battlefield that involved well-defined adversaries and clear rules of engagement. Soldiers were to adopt a 'warrior' mindset. However, United States troops are now more likely to engage paramilitary forces and nationless adversaries in unconventional actions that are less well defined and predictable. Adversaries can melt away when they are losing and re-emerge when they regain strength. In the context of unconventional warfare, a warrior mindset is still necessary but no longer sufficient.

During unconventional warfare, military personnel must take on the additional tasks of 'nation-building'. They are often charged with fostering the stabilization of local and national governance. They help rebuild infrastructure and human services. To succeed in these tasks they have to cultivate and retain good relations with citizens. These also make it more difficult for insurgents to gain a foothold, sabotage nation-building, and mount attacks against U. S. forces. Simultaneously managing two roles – warfighter and nation-builder – presents difficult challenges.

This research was designed to describe how the nation-building role plays out during the uncertain, complex, and potentially hostile setting of unconventional warfare. We asked military personnel how they managed conflicts, gained compliance, and de-escalated conflicts.

To approach these questions, we first conducted interviews with skilled police officers. Like military personnel during unconventional operations, police officers must fight crime and keep citizens safe but must also maintain safety at public events, provide emergency services, and support community development. Many police departments teach strategies for gaining voluntary compliance and de-escalating conflicts. We described police officers that were highly effective in these areas as having a "Good Stranger" mindset. They looked for opportunities to foster trusting relationships with civilians. They didn't take provocation personally but rather worked to de-escalate conflict and secure voluntary rather than coercive compliance.

Not all police officers are able to adopt the Good Stranger mindset. Some may have a personal need to dominate while others lack the social skills needed to engage strangers. These officers elicit anger from citizens and endanger both citizens and fellow officers. Peers didn't like to go out on patrol with them; when possible they are transferred to jobs away from civilians.

METHODS

Approach

The goal was to learn about the social skills and cognitive tools that best support the decisions and actions military personnel face in hostile environments. We interviewed military personnel about their field experience in potentially dangerous, hostile and uncertain settings. We listened for the cognitive and social challenges of unconventional operations as they engaged with citizens. The interviews provided a rich array of narratives reporting incidents encountered during deployment.

Sample

The sample consisted of 24 military participants with experience in Iraq and Afghanistan, and in some cases Japan, Bosnia, or other sites. They were drawn from the U.S. Marine Corps (n = 8) and from the U.S. Army, including the Army National Guard (n = 16). The participants ranged in rank from E-5 (several years of military service) to a retired Colonel.

Procedures

Using Cognitive Task Analysis (CTA) methods (Crandall, Klein, and Hoffman, 2006), we collected critical incidents the interviewee had experienced with civilians and with local military personnel during overseas deployments. The interviews lasted 39-123 minutes. The interviews were recorded and yielded 595 pages of transcripts. We asked about specific incidents that they had found to be challenging. We first asked the interviewee to provide an overview of the entire incident. We then guided each interviewee to identify key components, to describe the role of the key players, and to anchor these events in a time line.

Most interviews explored one or two incidents, a few had as many as three or four. A few lacked any incident with sufficient detail to allow scoring. We excluded one story that came prior to a participant's military experience as well as six undeveloped stories. A total of 48 incidents were used in this analysis.

We scored and recorded the specific features of each incident along with the initiating event or the assignment of the incident and the interviewee's early sense of the situation. This included goals, threats, and key participants. The incidents involved a variety of missions, such as transporting supplies, providing bank protection during money deliveries, or conducting check stops. The material that follows includes examples from our interviews. The details of the examples have been altered to guard the anonymity of participants while retaining the dynamics of the interaction.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The first and most powerful impression from listening to the interviews and from reviewing the transcripts was the differences among interviewees. Many of the military interviewees could articulate the circumstances that moved them to a Good Stranger Mindset. We found examples of effective strategies for taking the perspective of others and accommodating differences. Finally we identified strategies that are successful in maintain positive and trusting relationship even amidst hostility.

The Good Stranger Mindset

Origins

The interviewees showed great variety. Different experiences contributed to Good Stranger mindsets. Early family experience was important for some people. One interviewee reported: "It's probably from my family. At dinner, you could have an argument but you always listened to what the others said. That way everyone come out getting along. Now when I walk into a meeting I'm prepared for arguments but I try to listen to others needs and come up with plans that make my actions more acceptable to people." Another interviewee said: "For this mission, I went back to how I was raised: to greet people, to smile at people, to shake hands, because that's what I knew and what I'm comfortable doing."

Some interviewees adopted a Good Stranger mindset as a rejection of negative experiences: "When I just started there was a lot of issues with hazing. Things happened that I didn't particularly care for. I decided I was going to do the opposite of what some of the people I encountered did."

Prior work experience also shaped interaction with citizens. Interviewees with experience as police, social workers, or missionaries would mention these past experiences. One officer described a less usual experience: "One summer, I was a security guard at a bar. People were there to have fun. But people can get angry if somebody pushes them and it's crowded and hot. One of the things I learned was how to defuse the tensions before you have a situation. I used this 'defuse the crowd concept' overseas. I'm good with groups where not everybody gets along as long as they have a common goal."

Finally, some interviewees were driven to be more effective. They adopted the Good Stranger mindset because it helped them accomplish their missions. One reported: "To get anywhere with Afghanistan or Iraqi nationals the nicer you are to them, the nicer they are to you." Similarly, another said, "I try to develop personal relationships and trust. It's the only way we are going to win the war with the right people." He continued, "As you worked with the Iraqis and the Afghanis you learn what works and what doesn't work. You just have to figure out who is around you and what motivates them. How do you get them to accomplish or do what you want them to do?"

Perspective Taking

The Good Strangers try to get into another person's head, to feel what another might feel and to sense what the person would see as a satisfying resolution. If a Good Stranger can imagine how it would feel if people were to push their way into his own home, he is more likely to seek a less offensive way to carry out his mission. A warfighter, who can feel the loneliness of an Iraqi man working with U. S. soldiers, is more likely to learn some local language. For example, one soldier explained how he managed interactions respectfully, "When I worked a check stop, I try to keep in mind how it would feel to have a stranger from a foreign country stopping me and

demanding my identification." Another reported, "I want to treat these people like I would want my family treated at home."

Culture imposes limits on perspective taking. Interviewees often arrive in country lacking knowledge of cultural variation. They might understand the universal imperative of demonstrating respect but not the culture-specific ways of doing this. Assuming Western signs of respect to be universal can convey the wrong message. Direct eye contact may indicate respect one place while in another one should divert one's gaze to convey respect. While a U.S. officer may describe a threat in a calm controlled manor, in other cultures, a calm, unemotional style would suggest that the information was no importance or urgency. Knowledge of cultural variation fosters effective social interaction with divergent populations.

One interview reported, "I knew this one guy. Before we left stateside, he found a local restaurant run by people from the nation we were being deployed to. He'd gone and ate the food; he'd actually talk to these people. And he'd ask them, 'What's it like going over there? Do you still have family?' And they were like, 'Yeah, this is going on.' And when we'd talk to him, he'd be able to tell us; 'This is what these people are saying; it's like this over there right now.' It made me realize how important it was to think about the people we were going to help. When you can get into the heads of the people you'll encounter it's easier to work respectfully and effectively."

Preemptive Actions

Interviewees regularly reported that they tried to find time to walk around and greet people when passing through towns. Their missions in local community took on the additional goal of 'friendly presence' as they chatted over coffee at a local stall. Another interviewee reported that his unit always carried bottled water, prized by local people, to hand out. One unit carried soccer balls and initiate games with kids when their assigned missions allowed time. Finally, we were told how a routine check stop mission could turn into an information-gathering mission. After a friendly greeting, a driver going through his checkpoint used this brief and private contact to offer information about a suspected terrorist who has moved into an abandoned house in his neighborhood.

De-escalation

Some of the incidents reported show great mastery of de-escalation in difficult situations. During one tense period, rumors started that a shrine in a neighboring district had been desecrated and worshippers mistreated. An angry crowd moved towards the base. The situation was very explosive. The officer in charge was able to separate the leaders of the group and to ask them to sit down and talk. He explained that he did not believe these rumors to be true but that he would have them investigated and report back to them. As their discussions went on a long time, the crowd dispersed and the leaders went home. He quickly followed up by investigating the accusations and confirming their falsehood with photographs. In the following week, he brought the pictures to all of the leaders involved in the initial confrontation and discussion. He asked them to bring any future concern to his unit's commander. The interviewee indicated that there had been no further trouble in that region during the time he remained.

Voluntary Compliance

The military is sometimes charged with enforcing laws that are not popular. Soldiers and Marines are prepared to use their physical force to achieve compliance but this creates animosity. One interviewee described a successful incident he observed where force was avoided and voluntary compliance achieved through the use of verbal strategies. Here's how he described the incident: "We were working at a checkpoint. We stopped a black BMW and found the driver had a pistol but not the needed documentation. The man started out angry and really scared. The soldier in charge kept a defensive posture to protect himself and the others present. At the same time, we talked to the man respectfully. We told him the rules related to the various weapons and explained that since he didn't have the required documentation, he would have to leave the gun it until documentation could be produced. The man was not happy but the discussion stayed civil. He would interrupt a little bit and there would be an explanation going back and forth. In the end, we took the weapon, end of story. Instead of turning it into a knock–down-drag-out there on the side of the road, the checkpoint continued to flow."

Repair

Not every problem can be avoided. Military personnel also need skills to repair mistakes. Soon after his arrival, a military officer visited a local community to inspect progress on a construction project. While he was walking around the site with village representatives, his troops waited near their trucks. A large number of people gathered to watch the event. As he returned to the trucks with the village workers, his men stood up preparing to leave. Suddenly the sound of gunfire filled the air and screams were heard from the assembled villagers. At first, the officer thought it was an ambush and he would need to have his troops rush through the crowd to prevent further damage. Before he could issue the order, he heard, "Sir, I fired by mistake." The officer immediately assumed responsibility and ordered his medics to look at two workers who had been shot. The medics reported that one had very minor wounds and the second would require medical help. The officer immediately ordered that a vehicle immediately take the seriously wounded man to medical care and that another one take his family members to the hospital as well. His medic attended to the minor wounds. The next day he returned alone and

without a weapon to repeat his regrets. He found the community to be very appreciative because of his immediate acceptance of responsibility and medical helps. The village remained friendly throughout his stay.

The Power of Trust

Trust appears to be critical for establishing and maintaining the good will of civilians and even adversaries. Mayer and his colleagues (Mayer, Davis, & Schoorman, 1995; Schoorman, Mayer, & Davis 2007) working primarily with Westerners in organizational setting, identified Benevolence, Integrity, and Ability as dimensions critical for establishing trust during encounters. Their research suggests that trust can reduce hostility; increase information flow, and garner co-operation. It eases negotiation, and increases operational effectiveness during complex and dynamic interactions. We define a Good Stranger as a warfighter who seeks to increase trust from the local populace during all kinds of encounters.

The dimensions used to assess trustworthiness vary significantly by national group and situation (Klein et al., 2013). Dimensions beyond Mayer's three, include cognition (Markus & Kitayama, 1991); social values and priorities (Hofestede, 1980) as well as Affect, Non-Verbal Communization, Dialectical reasoning, Interdependence, and Status. These cultural variations make it more difficult to interpret information and correctly anticipate responses and decisions. Cultural differences are particularly important in hostile environments where misunderstandings are common and consequences potentially fatal.

The Power of the Good Stranger Mindset

Interviewees who were vigilant for opportunities to demonstrate their trustworthiness were particularly successful during social interactions. They wanted to believe that conflict resolution was attainable. While not letting down their Warrior mindset, they looked for resolutions that would increase trust among citizens. This positive stance or mindset appears to be a prerequisite for skilled social interaction performance. Warfighters who failed to cultivate a Good Stranger mindset did not strive for empathic and respectful interactions. The Good Stranger mindset is about wanting to increase trust from beginning to end of an encounter, and boosting the trust given to the organization, not just the individual.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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