

Maximising Understanding in a Complex Environment

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Introduction

Vital to ensuring the functioning of defence in the future operating environment is the ability to 'Understand'. The UK is likely to be required to operate in areas where success will be driven by awareness of, adaptation to, and influence of people, cultures and environment.

MOD papers and doctrine contain definitions, guidance and best practice concerning the required shift toward better human understanding and how Headquarters (HQs) should work in order to optimize their ability to 'Understand'.

The UK's Commander of Force Development and Training annually requests a package of work from the Army to establish an authoritative, evidence-based force development process that defines the Army's view of its future force structure and capability requirements. The Defence Science and Technology Laboratory (Dstl) worked alongside the Army to support that goal.

This paper discusses the work undertaken to support one area of that work package. The overall task was to:

*"Determine the 'Understand' demands of continuous, modulated engagement and deployed Brigade operations and recommend the optimum structures to meet them.
Identify and test the capabilities, processes and staff required to enhance the ability to 'Understand' in a deployed Brigade"*

Augmenting and Observing a HQ

Military processes have been optimised for large scale force on force conflict, however in future conflicts they may need to be adapted to reflect the required influence of the people, cultures and environment¹. An experimental construct was designed around an existing Brigade Command And Staff Training (CAST) exercise. This included observing how the HQ responded to these 'white' elements within a contemporary operating environment and testing augmentation of the HQ with a constructive contrarian team and social scientists.

A combined Dstl and military observer team was generated to bring a diverse set of experience, knowledge and approach. This team utilised a mixture of observations, informal stakeholder discussions and vignette injection to test the HQ.

Discussion

¹ A combination often referred to as the 'white' element.

The findings and recommendations discussed below often reflect that which is already contained in MOD papers and doctrine. This highlights the requirement to effectively operationalise these principles. Our findings indicate that there are two core capabilities required to improve 'Understanding' on deployed operations at Brigade level.

1. The facility to have a broad focus, and to challenge conventional military thinking
2. Effective Fusion to form a single intelligence narrative

The facility to have a broad focus, and to challenge conventional military thinking

1. Cultural advisors and social scientists

Given the perceived nature of future conflict and the now recognised importance of the human terrain within which the military will need to work, it is important that the HQ 'Understand' function looks outside of the conventional military stovepipes of Blue and Red. This will ensure a more complete understanding of the wider operating environment.

In order to improve the depth of understanding, augmentation of the Brigade with Subject Matter Experts (SMEs) is recommended. SMEs in the relevant culture (Cultural advisor or CULAD) and in how people interact in societies (social scientist) would add value to the HQ 'Understand' function. The augmented HQ contained a sociologist who became integrated into the Project Planning Group (PPG) and other planning processes and was deemed to have contributed to the development of a 'depth of understanding not otherwise achieved in the timescale'². We were unable to test the affect of the CULAD at this exercise and there may be redundancy of skill set between these two areas of expertise which is yet to be determined.

These SMEs need to be routinely integrated into the HQ. Early integration of these posts during HQ formulation will encourage a coherent and fused approach. In order for them to function effectively they may need to have a formalised role in the planning process. This was shown to be effective at the Brigade CAST where the augmentees were given prescribed inputs into key briefing processes as outlined by the Brigade Standard Operating Instruction (SOI).

The optimal location of the augmentees is still to be determined. In this CAST exercise it was observed that physically locating these SMEs away from other parts of the understand and intelligence cycle functions led to a conceptual separation. Earlier integration of SMEs and education of the staff to their abilities, as would be expected when a new Brigade HQ was formed would likely resolve this.

It is vital that the augmentees are subject matter experts and not just another staff post. They must be fully emancipated within the HQ. The Cultural advisor for example must have intimate knowledge of the culture the Brigade will be working within. Investment in obtaining this expertise would need to be made early within the routine structuring of Brigade HQs. Whilst it is difficult to predict what cultural expertise will be needed in advance, in peacetime a cultural generalist is required to ensure that military planners consider cultural factors. On planning or deploying on a specific operation, the relevant cultural specialists could be obtained from a fluid resource pool from outside of the MOD. The Defence Cultural Specialist Unit is tasked with the force generation of such specialists and their 'Cultural Cadres' reflect this proposed structure.³

2. The use of Constructive Contrarianism to challenge assumptions

² Comd Brigade Debrief

³ DGLW Annual Conference, DCSU CO Brief

Whether within its structure or doctrinally in the planning process the military encourages its people to form into cohesive groups. This process may override their motivation to realistically appraise alternative courses of action and they may display group-think⁴. Within the military planning process the presence of constructive contrarians may mitigate against this.

The concept of the Constructive Contrarian Team (CCT) within a Brigade is in the early stages of process maturity, however the concept itself is not new. Similar roles have been discussed elsewhere in government and have existed in other HQs, such as the Prism team reporting to Major General Carter in his role as the ISAF⁵ Commander of Regional Command (South).

In March 2005 the Robb-Silberman Report on Weapons of Mass Destruction noted:

'The widely recognised need for alternative analysis drives many to propose organisational solutions, such as 'red teams' and other formal mechanisms. Indeed, the Intelligence Reform and Terrorism Prevention Act mandates the establishment of such mechanisms to ensure that analysts conduct alternative analysis. Any such organs, the creation of which we encourage, must do more than just 'alternative analysis'. The Community should institute formal systems for competitive – and even explicitly contrarian – analysis. Such groups must be licensed to be troublesome. Further, they must take contrarian positions, not just ones that take a harder line...'

A CCT should function within, but critically remain independent of, the HQ planners. This is important to ensure they remain sufficiently engaged in planning, but not be tied up in process or have their thinking become overly aligned with that of the HQ. Their involvement from the early stages of planning should encourage a broader approach to the military estimate and ensure thoughts have been challenged in the development of the plan.

The correct Command atmosphere is important in ensuring the CCT is accepted and utilised within the HQ. The adversarial nature of their interactions may otherwise lead staff to become defensive. The experimentation showed a strong preference for early integration of the CCT into staff planning. Their involvement beginning at the Q1 stage of the estimate ensured the broader viewpoints were considered early and built into staff work. When only contributing later in the process they were viewed as scrutineers and not appropriately engaged.

The use of the CCT in the CAST exercise has highlighted the importance of a dual approach to their working, in that the best use of this function would be both in a top down and bottom up fashion. Top down, to be directed by the Commander, work with him to support his Understanding, challenging his thinking in a constructive manner. The bottom up approach requires encouraging broader thinking especially from the viewpoints of other stakeholders, to constructively challenge, to play a devil's advocacy role and asking the 'what if' questions early in the 'Understand'.

The composition of the CCT is important for its functioning and recommendations are considered below. The literature often refers to contrarian thinking under the umbrella of a team or person representing red, however here we are referring to them as a necessarily independent construct.

There is benefit from having a number of individuals; whilst we have no evidence at present to support a conclusion, a suggested number is 3. This is few enough not to feel like a Military Judgement Panel and large enough to contain the diversity of skill sets required.

The variety of opinions thought useful in this role are as follows:

- a. It is vital that there is someone that the Commander trusts and who understands the military process and culture. This requirement leans toward ex-service personnel or a reservist.
- b. Someone who can give the historical narrative on the area, a diplomat, historian or

⁴ The term groupthink refers to a type of thought process within a deeply cohesive in-group whose members try to minimize conflict and reach consensus without critically testing, analyzing, and evaluating ideas. It is a potential negative consequence of group cohesion.

⁵ International Security Assistance Force

strategist, possibly a local.

- c. Someone with the current cultural insights, may overlap with the historian above.

It is likely that to ensure the correct individuals for the post it will be necessary to reach out beyond the MOD into academia and beyond. Credibility is more important than rank and a strong personality is required.

Whilst there is value in having the CCT exist and be integrated into the Brigade HQ during routine, non-deployed functioning such as when on exercise, this may not be possible⁶. The culture specific members could remain fluid, in a pool of recognised participants whose standard roles may be outside of MOD, perhaps within academia. Like Maj Gen Carter's Prism structure, the individual specialists can then be called upon if and when needed, thereby not requiring a large increase in HQ posts when not deployed.

Effective Fusion to form a single intelligence narrative

Fusion across the 'Understand' function of the HQ will produce a more comprehensive understanding both in the HQ and for the Commander. This would ensure a single combined narrative rather than competing individual functions.

Physical features and layout of the HQ can influence fusion of thought. When observing the Brigade CAST it was apparent that the physical separation of the different components of the HQ Understand function (ISTAR, 'Red', 'White', social scientist and OA) led to a cognitive separation, thereby stove-piping the functions into separate planning processes and preventing fusion.

Ensuring where possible that these components are co-located will encourage the production of a single intelligence narrative for the HQ and Commander. Where this is not possible due to lay-out of expeditionary tented HQ for example, there should be formalised prompts for fusion in planning within the Brigade planning SOI.

Components of the planning cycle such as the Question One back brief aim to inform the Commander and wider HQ of the environment and key players within which they will operate. In the CAST exercise observed, poor ergonomics and acoustics for HQ briefings resulted in a reduced understanding by the wider HQ. A lack of effective Information Management (IM) and Information Exploitation (IX) was also seen to be a hindrance. Addressing this will ensure information is available and shared in a timely fashion to generate effective fusion.

Conclusions

The ability to 'understand' the conventional operating environment is vital to future military success. A number of core recommendations have been made to enhance this ability in a deployed Brigade. Most importantly a Brigade should look outside conventional military stovepipes of 'Red' and 'Blue' to encompass the cultural and environmental aspect to planning. Subject matter experts in cultures or social science are required to augment the HQ to instigate that broader focus. The use of constructive contrarianism to challenge conventional military thinking can ensure a more comprehensive planning cycle.

⁶ Financially, or otherwise, it is likely this is not a full time post in peace time