

Knowledge Management for Small Teams

by Captain David C. Millikan and Specialist Kaitlin M. McFarlane

Introduction

In February 2018, Combat Advisor Teams 1231 and 1331 and Battalion Advisor Team 140 deployed to Forward Support Base Arena in Herat, Afghanistan. As the farthest west element of the 1st Security Force Assistance Brigade, our unit was responsible for train, advise, assist, accompany, and enable operations in a part of Afghanistan that had not seen a conventional American presence in more than 4 years. Although the original vision for combat advisor teams had been to support Afghan maneuver battalion staffs, we quickly found ourselves advising a brigade commander and a hospital staff led by a one-star officer. This was more than a challenge for a 12-person team that had stood up in July, supported by a 9-man Guardian Angel squadron from 1st Battalion, 28th Infantry Regiment. Adding to the challenge was the fact that every echelon in a Security Force Assistance Brigade serves primarily as an advising unit, rather than a headquarters responsible for

maneuvering subordinate units. While commanders at every level can imagine the problems to which this could lead, one unforeseen problem was the amount of information our team would collect and the difficulty we would have retaining, storing, and presenting the information to advisors for decision making in support of their partners. To this end, our team, along with the staff at Battalion Advisor Team 140, developed a functional knowledge management system to ensure information was shared inside the team, retained for future use, and ready for presentation to outside agencies.

Intelligence Serves as the Center of Gravity

Upon arrival at Forward Support Base Arena, all three teams found themselves under the command of Italian advisors at the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) Train Advise Assist Command-West, leading advising efforts in Herat with the Afghan National Army's 207th Corps.



Photo by U.S. Army, CPT Adam Hendriks

The Afghan National Army's 207th Corps and the Afghan National Police's 606 Zone join Train Advise Assist Command-West for a three-day operational planning conference at the mission planning facility on Camp Arena, 7-9 July 2018. 1st Security Force Assistance Brigade advisors assigned to TAAC-West guide their Afghan partners through the military decision-making process. The brigade advising team from 4th Battalion, 1st SFAB showed their corps and brigade partners how to integrate a wide range of military skills like intelligence, field artillery, and logistics into a comprehensive operational plan.

While Combat Advisor Team 1331 and Battalion Advisor Team 140 were assigned to support expeditionary advising platform missions and targeting, Combat Advisor Team 1231 found itself advising at the Regional Military Training Center, where Afghan soldiers received training following graduation from basic training in Kabul. Since no American unit was available to provide us with a relief in place, critical to our success or failure on Camp Zafar, the headquarters of the 207th Corps in Herat, was the need to catalog information about training, logistics, and administration—there would be no time to ask questions twice. To handle this problem, we assigned the responsibility for knowledge management to our intelligence advisor.

share not only information concerning operations but also personal details about our partner’s families, frustrations, likes, and dislikes. We’re not recommending that you reduce your partners to a set of data points to collect. We are however recommending that forging a personal relationship with your partner is as important to building trust as it is to demonstrating technical and tactical competence. At the conclusion of the meeting, the intelligence advisor compiled the report and collected any documents brought back for translation, while the operations advisor added due-outs to the task tracker for execution and follow-up. The remainder of the advisors then began scheduling their next engagements. Given the fast pace of daily advising operations,

this was the only regular meeting attended by all members of the team, and as such was never skipped or rescheduled.

The Advisor Network Report

At this point, the intelligence advisor began building the Advisor Network (ANET) report. This was our primary touch-point with higher-level Train Advise Assist Command-West advisors, and after each mission, the Battalion Advisor Team 140 reviewed the report. Although we could have simply dumped the debrief into ANET, the intelligence advisor took the time to rewrite the report. This ensured

important information was clearly identified to other agencies on Arena and avoided confusion for any non-English speakers reading the report. A reality of coalition warfare is the need to communicate complex ideas as simply as possible—there’s no room for non-doctrinal terms or huge blocks of text. Once approved, the reports posted to ANET became available to users for review, and we began to receive requests for information from a variety of agencies. These requests came from the Joint Expeditionary Team asking to join us during follow-up engagements, the National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency requesting refined coordinates to different locations, and planning staffs at Resolute Support Mission asking for updates on programs they were running from Kabul. In short, we found ourselves in the position of the primary American information-gathering unit to the 207th Corps. These requests for information were assigned to advisors to answer during later engagements.

Managing Translation Tasks

The intelligence advisor’s next task was to translate documents gathered during the engagement. Very quickly,



U.S. Army photo by Sean Kimmons

SFC Jeremiah Velez, left, and CPT David Zak, center, both advisors with the 1st Security Force Assistance Brigade’s 3rd Squadron, speak with their Afghan National Army counterparts during a routine fly-to-advise mission at Forward Operating Base Altimur, Afghanistan, September 19, 2018.

The intelligence warfighting function “facilitates understanding the enemy, terrain, weather, civil considerations, and other significant aspects of the operational environment.”¹ As such, intelligence serves as the center of gravity for all advising activities. Without an understanding of the problem, advisors cannot recommend solutions; just as without tactical and technical expertise, advisors cannot expect their advice to be trusted or acted upon. Because of our limited personnel, only a small number of advisors could work with Regional Military Training Center staff during our engagements.

To ensure the sharing of information across the team, we instituted post-mission debriefs, chaired by the intelligence advisor. Meetings generally followed the same format: a detailed description of the advising engagement, along with any due-outs or requests made by our partners, followed by a discussion of atmospheric by the Guardian Angel squadron leader. As necessary, U.S. counterintelligence and counterintelligence teams attended these meetings. When discussing our partners, advisors made sure to

we learned two things: first, any documents not digitally scanned and saved would eventually disappear; and second, each translator was best suited for a different type of translation. Local nationals were more skilled at understanding slang and military terms; category III linguists worked well translating formal letters; and military occupational specialty 35L (Counterintelligence Agent) linguists handled data entry and word processing. As mundane as this sounds, there was nothing more embarrassing or detrimental to our partners' trust as having to ask for copies of documents they had already provided us. On the positive side, having a quick turnaround on document translation allowed us to ask more meaningful questions and to better understand the problems our partners faced.

Eventually, we taught our 35L to re-create the translated documents in Microsoft Word, rather than returning the document to us with a handwritten translation. This decreased the time it took to get these documents in front of decision makers and helped to eliminate some of the translation errors we were seeing. With regard to translation work, we recommend—

- ◆ Use a standard format for translators' notes, which will help you to know when a translator is unclear on the meaning of a word, or if there is a cultural nuance to the translation that you might miss.
- ◆ Make it clear to translators what your priority is.
- ◆ Identify how much time the translators should spend on a document.
- ◆ Develop a system to track which documents they are translating.
- ◆ Provide direct guidance to your translators on your intent.

Relief-in-Place Planning

From here, the team had enough information to answer requests for information, seek guidance from supporting agencies (especially Finance and the Joint Engineering Cell), and move forward to support our partners. After a couple months of advising, the process became self-sustaining, and we began to have more questions than we could answer. Working closely with the corps-levels helped us to determine which questions would be the most productive

to spend our time on. At this point, the team began compiling our own relief-in-place guidebook, detailing on-post and off-post agencies, and including everything we had come to know about our partners using Train Advise Assist Command-West's baseball card format. More than being an introduction to Herat, it was our hope that a well-done re-



SFC Christopher Davis, an advisor with 1st Security Force Assistance Brigade, teaches a map reading class to Afghan soldiers September 18, 2018. In his first advising role, Davis built up an artillery leader's course and a land navigation and reporting course for Afghan soldiers. He has also taught them on their communications systems as part of the brigade's advising efforts.

U.S. Army photo by Sean Kimmons

lief-in-place guide would allow any follow-on units to avoid the slow start we had gone through. It would also allow the team to continue the mission in the event an advisor was needed to support a mission in a different area of operations. The sooner relief-in-place planning begins, the better. We cannot stress enough the value of having every advisor and Guardian Angel write down anything they do not know—the incoming unit will have the same questions. Do not wait until you know everything, because by then, you will have forgotten what it was like to know nothing.

Knowledge Management

While the intelligence advisor managed the knowledge management process of our team, other team members were responsible for different parts of the system. To begin, the team leader was responsible for designing the overall framework for the system and ensuring quality control of the outputs. Supporting this was the signal advisor, who was responsible for building the technical parts of the system. Ensuring someone on your team is able to build an online repository for the information and transfer information across domains is extremely useful. During our deployment, we found SharePoint to be an effective system, especially when working with other U.S. units, although it can be

difficult to transfer information to non-U.S. domains used by NATO partners.

Having developed a system to collect, retain, and use information, what can a small team do to improve on this system? As useful as it would be to use a Microsoft Access database to record information on our engagements, knowledge management systems are only useful if they outlive their creators—if the unit replacing you is unable or unwilling to use your system, you have wasted your time creating it. As long as ANET is the system of record for collecting engagement reports, small teams use simple systems that reinforce ANET, not undermine it.

Conclusion

While knowledge management is generally thought of as something to be practiced at the battalion level and higher, teams at any level can effectively use the iterative process of assess, design, develop, pilot, and implement to guide deci-

sion making. It is especially useful when prioritizing the limited time available to small units operating without robust staff oversight. Ultimately, advising at the combat advisor team level is a people-focused profession, not a product-focused one. By processing information quickly and getting it where it needs to go, teams can spend more time developing trusting relationships with their partners, and less time stuck behind a computer. 🌟

Endnote

1. Department of the Army, Army Doctrine Reference Publication 3-0, *Operations* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Publishing Office [GPO], 6 October 2017), 5-4.

Reference

Department of the Army. Army Techniques Publication 6-01.1, *Techniques for Effective Knowledge Management*. Washington, DC: U.S. GPO, 6 March 2015.

CPT David Millikan currently serves as a team leader on Combat Advisor Team 1231. His previous assignments include platoon leader and executive officer at the Joint Multinational Readiness Center in Hohenfels, Germany; Deputy Branch Chief for Training Support at the Mission Command Center of Excellence in Fort Leavenworth, KS; operations officer while deployed with Special Operations Planning and Liaison Element-Afghanistan; brigade assistant operations officer with 2nd Infantry Brigade Combat Team, 4th Infantry Division, Fort Carson, CO; and Commander, Delta Company (WPN), 1st Battalion, 41st Infantry Regiment. He has deployed to Afghanistan three times.

SPC Kaitlin McFarlane currently serves as an all-source intelligence analyst with the 10th Mountain Division. She served as an intelligence advisor on Combat Advisor Team 1231 during 1st Security Force Assistance Brigade's inaugural deployment to Afghanistan, where she managed intelligence targeting collection operations in Herat.

The Distributed Common Ground Station-Army (DCGS-A) training team from the 304th MI Battalion has created a page on SIPRNET Intellipedia. The page has links to many materials that supplement the platform instructions the team gives on DCGS-A software at USAICoE. Among the things you'll find on the page are:

- Step-by-Step Instructions on how to perform the ArcGIS tasks (basic and advanced), which the team covers in its DCGS-A instruction.
- A collection of useful documents on DCGS-A architecture.
- Descriptions of DOD and Intelligence Community data sources, whose data can be imported to/analyzed in DCGS-A software. For example, NGA's Net-centered Geospatial Delivery System (NGDS) is a web portal that carries current satellite and airborne imagery segments. DCGS-A users can use NGDS to find current images of their AO, and then download chips of those images into ArcMap and the Multifunction Workstation's (MFWS) 2D Map. The result---an image "layer," which can be overlaid over background maps/CIB imagery, to give a more current and high resolution view of the terrain and facilities in your AO.

To access our page, go to SIPRNET Intellipedia and search for "304th DCGS-A Training Team." Our contact information is on the page; please give us your feedback.