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The Limits of Training in Iraqi Force Development

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The National Strategy for Victory in Iraq has three avenues: the political track, the economic track, and the security track.¹ While the three are mutually reinforcing, the national strategy is largely dependent on significantly improving security. Moreover, security has been “our most important and pressing objective” since the summer of 2003.² As noted then by Douglas Feith, Undersecretary of Defense for Policy, “Without security, we can’t rebuild the Iraqi infrastructure and protect it from sabotage, nor can we expect Iraqi political life to revive if Iraqis don’t feel secure enough to travel, go to meetings, express their views without intimidation.”³

In July 2003, former Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz articulated the basic US exit strategy: properly train the Iraqi police, army, and civil defense forces and they will take over the security work being done by Americans.⁴ This carried forward into the national strategy, which contains the core assumption that while the United States “can help, assist, and train, Iraqis will ultimately be the ones to eliminate their security threats over the long term.”⁵ Prominent critics have repeatedly called on the administration to accelerate the training of Iraqi forces, or quickly finish it.⁶ None, however, has challenged the core assumption that US forces are mostly going to train their way out of Iraq.

It would appear, therefore, that training the Iraqi forces is one of our most important and pressing objectives, a key to victory. To that end, some of the world’s best instructors have trained over 277,000 Iraqi security forces.⁷ Courses have ranged from basic police officer training to special commando training. More than 40 countries have participated in this effort, with billions

of dollars spent.⁸ Other coalition forces have “mentored” the Iraqis through field exercises and supervision. Yet despite significant progress, there is nearly universal agreement that Iraqi forces will not be able to take over our security responsibilities any time soon. Why hasn’t all of this training solved the problem?

At least part of the answer is that training is the wrong intervention for many of the ills in the Iraqi security forces and society. Training can help solve many human performance issues. It can help make great armies. It is rarely, however, the entire solution, and it is a poor match for many of the problems identified in the National Strategy for Victory in Iraq. As the painful events of the last three years have shown, more training courses are not going to stabilize Iraq. This article explains why and provides a clearer lens through which to view this key part of the overall mission.

The Power of Training

Training is a form of performance intervention designed to improve the skills, knowledge, and, to some extent, the attitudes of students. This often leads to improved work performance. In the US armed forces, training is used to solve or prevent problems ranging from bad mess hall food to unstable nuclear weapons. It also supports new performances. Training is normally thought of as a specific course of instruction, usually in a classroom or at a training facility. On-line and computer-based courses are also becoming more widespread. Other learning activities such as unit exercises, drills, and individual performance counseling are also sometimes called training; however, the national strategy appears to use the label “mentoring” for these types of programs. Thus, US forces are said to be training and mentoring the Iraqi forces, or helping, assisting, and training them.⁹

A good training program begins with some sort of analysis of the gap between current and desired knowledge and skills. Many programs, however, assume that the incoming students know little about the material and focus on identifying the desired end-state. For more complex matters, the analysis may be called a competency map; that is, a formal effort to identify, list, track, label, and measure the knowledge, skills, attributes, attitudes, and traits necessary for a student to succeed at various levels of an organization.¹⁰ This can

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lead to a blueprint, map, or matrix to drive training, and other key decisions such as personnel selection.

As every military leader knows, the right training can help produce highly effective forces with the skills, knowledge, and attitudes necessary to win conflicts. Training and mentoring can build fighting spirit, aggressiveness, and strong morale, allowing quantitatively inferior forces to prevail.¹¹ Training and mentoring reinforce unit cohesion, bonding the group together in a way to sustain their will and commitment to each other, their unit, and mission.¹² In short, training and mentoring can be a powerful “force multiplier”—just what the Iraqi security forces need, at least if the root problem is a lack of skills and knowledge.

The Limits of Training

Training, however, cannot solve all human performance problems. Some disciplines view training as a last resort, to be employed only when no other means of improving performance will work.¹³ Or, as trainers sometimes put it, “If I hold a gun to your head and you can do it, then a lack of training wasn’t the problem.” In fact, training is rarely the entire solution to a problem or the sole way to realize an opportunity.

Two disparate examples illustrate the universal and timeless nature of this principle. In 1861, Colonel Robert E. Lee, considered by many contemporaries to be the finest officer in the United States Army, declined its command and resigned his commission to serve his home state of Virginia.¹⁴ Lee was a graduate of West Point and a combat veteran who had been mentored by General in Chief Winfield Scott. Lee’s training and development was complete with the moment of national crisis at hand. He was devoted to the Union and the Army. He felt strong loyalty and duty as an American citizen and opposed secession, thinking it contrary to the Constitution.¹⁵ Commanding the rapidly expanding US Army offered the ultimate professional accomplishment and challenge. It would have fully satisfied his personal ambitions. General Scott, his long-standing mentor and dear friend, tried to keep Lee in Union service. Yet Lee refused, at great personal cost, giving what has been called “the answer he was born to make.”¹⁶

From the federal perspective, Robert E. Lee failed to perform the duties he had been perfectly trained and mentored to assume. Lee, however, was a Virginian first and foremost. No amount of training, development, or logic could change that.

The limits of training and mentoring are also apparent in far more mundane situations. For example, the Women’s Health Initiative Study is a large, long-term study on the effect of diet upon health.¹⁷ One goal is to study

the impact of reducing dietary fat intake on the rates of various cancers. The study selected highly motivated and dedicated participants for assignment to the low-fat diet group. They were to reduce their daily fat consumption to no more than 20 percent of total daily calories.

The study's designers and government sponsors assumed that the eating behavior of these highly motivated volunteers could be changed through training and support. Consistent with this assumption, each member of the low-fat group received 18 intensive dietary counseling sessions in the first year with quarterly maintenance sessions thereafter. Despite this intervention, the group reduced fat intake only modestly, to 29 percent. Training and support had helped somewhat, but the study ultimately failed. In this instance, modern scientists and government officials greatly overestimated their ability to change a fairly straightforward behavior through training.

Root Causes of Human Performance Problems

Both Robert E. Lee's resignation from the federal army and the Women's Health Initiative Study can be described as human performance problems. In each case, the person, or persons, could have done as expected but did not. While one case implicated significant issues of duty and identity and the other involved a series of routine dietary decisions, both involved capable human beings not performing as desired—and as trained.

The relatively new discipline of Human Performance Technology (HPT) takes a systemic approach to human performance issues. It draws upon several other disciplines, including learning psychology and organizational development and change.¹⁸ HPT practitioners have identified four root causes for performance problems at the level of the individual performer: (1) a lack of skills or knowledge, (2) a flawed work environment, (3) flawed incentives, and (4) a lack of motivation.¹⁹ Related factors include the organization's culture and design, along with its personnel selection criteria.

A lack of skills and knowledge is the most straightforward root cause and the only one where training is likely to be a significant part of the solution. For example, if Cadet Lee didn't know how to clean a musket to US Army standards or read a map, training could be an effective intervention. The same is true if a volunteer subject in the Women's Health Study didn't know how to calculate the fat content of her meals. Refresher training, or some type of job aid, may also be appropriate when someone who has been able to perform a task in the past has forgotten how to do so.

A flawed work environment often concerns problems with the tools necessary to get the job done; for example, a lack of horses for an 1860s cavalry company or lack of vehicles for modern soldiers. As every leader knows,

these types of equipment problems can be fatal to mission accomplishment. Training, however, cannot help solve the problem unless a lack of skills and knowledge is causing the vehicle shortage.

A flawed work environment may also concern a lack of feedback or poor leadership. Leaders may say one thing, through training, yet act very differently. Or the environment may send powerful messages that undermine the desired performance. For example, the subjects in the Women's Health Study conducted their "work" while going about their daily lives. Most were undoubtedly bombarded by media images and advertising that encouraged them to eat tasty, convenient, and fast foods that also happen to be high in fat. Some women probably were surrounded by high-fat foods as family members and peers maintained their normal eating habits. Others had very busy schedules. Like many Americans, they probably ate on the go, grabbing the most convenient, and frequently higher fat, offering—notwithstanding the intensive training and counseling. In hindsight this all appears obvious; however, assumptions about training and mentoring blinded the scientists to the importance of fully understanding the root causes of a performance challenge. It is a common mistake.

The flawed incentives category takes a broader look at how the workplace system rewards the desired performance or responds to substandard performance. A stereotypical example of this problem is an organization that "rewards" its best performers with more work, perhaps unpleasant or even dangerous, while promotions and salary increases are based solely on longevity. A system may have few daily incentives for the desired performance. It may even reward negative performance. For example, a woman in the low-fat group of the Women's Health Study who ordered take-out pizza to silence her whining children instead of cooking a low-fat meal was immediately rewarded with silent children, less work, and more time. These types of powerful incentives may be why one of the study's principal investigators now believes that the general population could never reduce fat intake to the desired levels, even with intensive dietary counseling.²⁰

The right incentives, on the other hand, can powerfully reinforce desired behaviors. For example, in 1825 the US Military Academy had an elaborate system of both positive and negative incentives for Cadet Robert E. Lee. He earned regular membership in the corps of cadets only by passing first-term examinations.²¹ A summer furlough depended upon his grades and conduct. Superior students such as Lee earned extra money and privileges by serving as acting assistant professors of mathematics, and only the top graduates chose their arm of the service. This incentive system, with its capitalistic elements, rewarded those who obeyed the rules and produced the best academic results.

Motivation looks to the internal forces that energize, direct, and sustain an individual's behavior. It helps explain why Cadet Lee worked so hard to excel at West Point while others facing the exact same workplace incentives were far less diligent.

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs Theory is one of the most widely used models and is frequently used to diagnose performance problems caused by motivational gaps.²² It holds that all people have certain needs that they strive to meet. Basic or lower-level needs such as food, safety, and acceptance must be met before the higher growth needs are pursued.²³ As with all generalizations, the model has its limits and even Maslow recognized that not everyone followed his hierarchy.²⁴ There are also other theories with different needs classifications; however, internal motivation can be viewed as part of a comprehensive systems approach to improving and sustaining desired performance.²⁵

For example, all the armed forces of the United States offer a large menu of personal and family support services to active-duty service members and their families. These mostly free services range from financial counseling to basic legal services. The theory behind these programs is that helping service members with their unmet lower-level, or "security," needs will keep them focused on work and motivate them to higher levels of job performance.²⁶

Organizational Influences

Beyond the individual worker or small team, the organization in which the performance occurs exerts a powerful, if not controlling, influence on workplace performance. Two of the most relevant contributors to the ultimate success of the Iraqi national security forces are organizational culture and personnel selection criteria.

An organization's culture is commonly described as the shared system of values, beliefs, and behaviors that characterize the group of people.²⁷ It is the group's norms, practices, and philosophy; in short, the *real* rules of the game for getting along or "how we *really* do things around here."²⁸ An organization's culture can be changed over time, if fully supported by all levels of leadership. Instant or revolutionary culture change, however, is impossible. It is the shared experience and common history of a group, over time, that changes a culture.²⁹ Anyone who wants to change the organizational culture must commit to a long-term evolutionary process, especially if the organization's culture flows directly from societal values and practices.

It seems obvious that selecting the right people is critically important to workplace performance. However, this remains a challenge for many organizations—even those making routine hiring and promotion decisions in

stable western societies.³⁰ Evaluating one's potential is not easy, especially when the new job differs from a candidate's experience. Moreover, evaluating how well a candidate's values align with those of the organization is extremely difficult, if not impossible, absent extensive pre-hiring evaluation. This is true even when both the selection official and candidate speak the same language and there is little risk that the applicant is seeking to infiltrate the organization in order to destroy it from within.

Iraq in 2006: "The Year of the Police"

As a result of persistent problems in the 162,600-member Iraqi police forces, the focus has shifted to improving their performance.³¹ Senior leaders in Iraq designated 2006 as "The Year of the Police,"³² and President Bush has repeated this theme in major speeches on the war.³³

The Iraqi police are under the control of the Ministry of Interior (MOI). The MOI forces, or police, consist of the Iraq Police Service (IPS), National Police, Department of Border Enforcement, and Center for Dignitary Protection.³⁴ MOI forces comprise over half of all Iraqi security forces and are slated to grow to a final end strength of 188,000 by December 2006.³⁵

One goal of "The Year of the Police" is to train the police to provide security in urban settings throughout Iraq.³⁶ According to the Inspectors General of the State and Defense Departments, the National Security Council, and many others, a number of significant obstacles remain.

For starters, police work in Iraq is increasingly hazardous, with nearly 1,500 killed and over 3,200 wounded during 2005.³⁷ It's a very dangerous job, both for the police officer and his family. This has led to a perception that past training programs, emphasizing quantity over quality, have mostly produced "cannon fodder."³⁸

Under Saddam Hussein, all police forces were perceived as the corrupt and brutal implementers of oppression.³⁹ The regular police, however, were conditioned to be passive, waiting for the secret police to call them out of the station when needed.⁴⁰ Moreover, many of the current police chiefs and deputies are accustomed to the culture of the Saddam era, where forced confessions were the primary investigative tool and responsibilities were rigidly delineated.⁴¹

Today, the Iraqi police are highly decentralized, which has led to some local "fiefdoms" subject to local political maneuvering and divided loyalties.⁴² MOI command and control is rudimentary, with the ministry lacking even a basic readiness reporting system for its units.⁴³ Corruption is widespread and deeply rooted, with local police chiefs said to frequently take a cut of their officers' salaries.⁴⁴ The Ministry of Interior was found to have many

“ghost” employees on its payroll.⁴⁵ Some payments were for family or tribal members, while others served as an informal retirement program, and this was at a time when some active-duty officers went unpaid for weeks. Due in part to funding problems, a significant number of police academy graduates were not hired as police officers. They were trained by the Coalition and then went home.

The MOI has not accepted ownership of all the various police units.⁴⁶ It has provided only grudging support to police forces such as the Emergency Response Unit, the Bureau of Dignitary Protection, and provincial SWAT (special weapons and tactics) teams. As such, these units experienced frequent pay problems and high attrition.⁴⁷

The selection and screening of new recruits and leaders has been problematic and often based on cronyism and personal loyalties.⁴⁸ Others have been required to pay bribes to obtain an appointment. As late as April 2005, new entrants received only a cursory physical exam.⁴⁹ Illiterates made it into basic training, as did some criminals and drug users. There are also widespread reports of insurgent infiltration. Merit-based selection for leadership training, or assignment to special units, is still a foreign concept.

There also have been structural problems with earlier training programs. Iraqi officials had only limited input into standards and curricula, which had not been standardized across the various training sources. Additionally, like most students, Iraqis learn much better through hands-on exercises. Unfortunately, much of the early training emphasized classroom lectures using interpreters. There also was only limited testing to measure student retention, with none in advanced and specialty courses.⁵⁰

On top of all this, Iraq is a tribal society where an individual’s identity, and primary loyalty, runs to family, tribe, ethnic group, and religious sect. Political identity is also based on one’s tribal or sectarian group.⁵¹ Some elements of the MOI forces, therefore, appear to serve Shi’ite, Kurdish, or Iranian interests, acting as sectarian and ethnic forces that abuse and murder Sunnis. Powerful militias and armed groups, often affiliated with political parties, have infiltrated the police forces. The primary loyalties of Iraqi police are thus so doubtful that members of the Bureau of Dignitary Protection are normally selected from the guarded dignitary’s family or tribe.⁵² These trusted agents and relatives are then trained to serve in the bureau for the duration of their sponsor’s term of service. Reportedly, the former prime minister ordered his own security force to fire on any police that approached his headquarters without advance notice.⁵³

Moreover, Iraq is just emerging from three decades of a vicious tyranny where government authority stemmed solely from fear, terror, and brutality.⁵⁴ This corrosive misrule stifled initiative and confidence. People

naturally distrust their government, suspect American motives, and look to regional or sectarian powers to protect their interests.

Despite these many challenges, some training efforts have been a qualified success.⁵⁵ The Multi-national Security Transition Command has delivered many high-quality courses that have had a real impact on some Iraqi units. But how many of the remaining problems with the Iraqi forces involve a lack of skills and knowledge? Is the needed mission still training, or is it something far more complex?

Applying Human Performance Technology Principles

While the situation has been frequently described as a training challenge, the real goal since 2003 has been to create capable Iraqi security forces to replace our own. As President Bush says, “As they stand up, we’ll stand down.”⁵⁶ While some Iraqi units are highly effective, the overall force still has a long way to go. Yet only a few of the remaining significant problems can be successfully addressed by training.

For example, insurgents frequently use the cover of darkness to plant explosives and conduct operations. Experts agree that nighttime patrolling and intelligence-gathering activities employ very different tactics from daylight operations.⁵⁷ However, many graduates of the basic police course received no training in night tactics. Additional training courses to prepare them for nighttime operations against the insurgency should improve performance—assuming that this lack of skills and knowledge is the primary impediment.

Training also can help educate Ministry of Interior officials on the importance of standardized operating and supply procedures. Coalition teams can demonstrate the usefulness of a readiness reporting system to MOI leadership. Training courses also can provide the knowledge and skills to create and run a system to measure unit readiness.

Finally, the methods and techniques used in the courses can be refined to improve the training, or retraining, of future students. Testing, including evaluating performance in hands-on exercises, can be added to ensure that students retain the lessons and have the ability to perform the desired skills. Curricula can be adjusted based on Iraqi needs and standardized across all training sources. Instruction can be done in Arabic and made more culturally relevant and authentic for the average Iraqi. Addressing these issues will undoubtedly improve the skills and knowledge of the Iraqi police forces.

Yet training will not improve police effectiveness in activities such as nighttime operations if the root problem is a flawed work environment such as

a lack of night vision gear or timid leadership. The same is true if individual police officers fear for the lives of their families. Training also won't improve effectiveness if the professional culture is to be passive, avoid risks, and demand bribes. Additional training won't improve nighttime effectiveness in units infiltrated by insurgents, loyal to the local militia, or staffed by physically disabled police officers who joined the force out of financial desperation.

More training will have only a small effect on performance if Iraqi police officers are not paid regularly in order to support ghost employees at the Ministry of Interior. It also won't improve performance in units where the only "reward" for following the trained procedures is to always get the most dangerous assignments while poor performers from certain tribes or families face no negative consequences.

In fact, most of the security challenges identified in the 2005 joint Defense and State Department police training assessment, the National Strategy for Victory in Iraq, and a host of other reports are not training problems. Instead they go to improper selection of police candidates and leaders, a poor organizational culture, flawed work environments, divided loyalties, and officers focused on basic survival. These are the root problems in many units, and Human Performance Technology principles tell us that more training courses will not solve them.

Viewed in this light, the Coalition training courses have been merely the foundation for the hard work the Iraqis must do to address root issues such as sectarian identity and strife. We have taught thousands to shoot straight and true, but many Iraqis still must decide whom they will shoot at and why. Future courses might even be considered part of the background, or supporting cast, for this broader Iraqi effort. Assuming some level of success, the skills and knowledge gained through training can then be put to good use.

Moving forward, the US plan appears to be a more comprehensive engagement with the Iraqis to help them change behaviors while building Iraqi institutions to address the root problems. The Center for Military Values, Principles, and Leadership, which opened in Rustamiyah, Iraq, in July 2006, is an example of these new institutions.⁵⁸ Its ambitious goal is to identify, build, and enforce Iraqi military values and ethics. While the program is currently run by Coalition trainers, Iraqi staff members are scheduled to take full control of it by July 2007.

Over time, these new institutions and behaviors might eventually change values. These values eventually might become part of the professional culture, helping members of the security forces to see themselves as guardians of the state and all the Iraqi people. It is a very ambitious goal. Yet even long-standing critics think the National Strategy for Victory in Iraq can still work, notwithstanding skepticism over any nation-building effort.⁵⁹ It re-

mains unclear, however, if the Iraqis are willing or able to reinvent their security forces and society. Moreover, advisors on the ground know that this process “can take decades” and “is a generational goal.”⁶⁰ Another American commander put it this way:

We’ve had a tremendous impact shaping behavior, and I think that we’re making strides toward changing values. But the fact is most of the people in this country [Iraq] have learned and operate the way they do based on 35 years of experience. . . . Right now we’re shaping behavior, we’re starting to affect values, but changing values is going to take a long time.⁶¹

Conclusion

The National Strategy for Victory in Iraq and much of the public debate surrounding it leaves the impression that additional training will go a long way toward solving the security problem and bringing our troops home. This focus on training, which most people think of as a relatively short-term effort involving courses, presents an unrealistic picture of the mission. It also may have undermined domestic support for the holistic, longer-term effort required to address all aspects of Iraqi force development and implement the new counterinsurgency doctrine.⁶²

Training cannot improve the long-term performance of Iraqi national security forces unless the lack of skills and knowledge are the root causes of their problems. Intensive training, including regular refresher training and support, was unsuccessful in getting a group of highly motivated western women to eat a low-fat diet. We cannot expect it to change the culture of the Ministry of Interior police forces in a few years. Decades of training, mentoring, and development did not turn Robert E. Lee’s ultimate loyalty away from Virginia and toward the United States. Similarly, it will not end regional ethnic divides in Iraq or change tribal values and identity.

The security portion of the National Strategy for Victory in Iraq is a multidimensional and nuanced document. However, training, or something akin to training, is the dominant label used for the means by which US forces are to accomplish the mission. This may be the result of institutional resistance to the more comprehensive term “nation-building” or the difficulty of succinctly explaining the counterinsurgency strategy.⁶³ Whatever the cause, national leaders emphasized training, leaving the impression that we were going to train our way out of Iraq.

These words have continuing power, with President Bush discussing a revised Iraq training strategy in late October 2006.⁶⁴ It’s time to more accurately describe what US forces are attempting to accomplish in Iraq. Clearly, it’s much more than just training and mentoring. Call the task nation-building,

culture change, or societal reform. Any realistic label will do, provided it reflects a far more complex task and recognizes the limits of our ability to control the outcome. Just don't call it a training program—unless failure *is* an option.

NOTES

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