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**LESSONS LEARNED:
13 MONTHS AS THE SENIOR MILITARY ADVISOR
TO THE MINISTER OF INTERIOR**

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As I am spending my last night here at Camp Eggers, I cannot help but look back over the past 13 plus months that I spent as the Senior Military Advisor to the Minister of Interior (MoI), and think of how this assignment and duty could have been more effective and what lessons learned I can leave behind for those who will carry the mission onward. Do not get me wrong, this job was a once in a lifetime experience for me in many ways, but as always, when reflecting on how this all came about, one can always find a way to be more effective. I considered the whole continuum, not only from initial selection and proper preparation for the assignment, but even how to “introduce” myself to one of the leading government officials in the country, as well as his Deputy Ministers and officials. Working with the Minister, his Deputy Ministers, and other executives was only one part of the equation. There were others to answer to and to coordinate with not only at NATO Training Mission-Afghanistan/Combined Security Transition Command-Afghanistan (NTM-A/CSTC-A), but also the commander and staff of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) and later the ISAF Joint Command (IJC). This was a whole new dimension for me, as my predecessor did not talk to nor was required to coordinate with anyone outside the ministry and NTM-A/CSTC-A. There were a lot of lessons learned. Hopefully ones that my successors and those commanders and leaders of organizations that work with and support the MoI and Afghan National Police will take into account.

Selection and Pre-Deployment Train-Up.

When I was first alerted by the Army Senior Leader Division that I was identified to deploy to Afghanistan to fill a senior advisor to the Minister of Interior position, I thought to myself, what qualifies me to fill such a position? What criteria were used, and did anyone check my character or personality to see if I would be “compatible” working with other advisors, let alone a senior foreign official? By all accounts, the normal personnel replacement procedure was used, which consisted of looking through the database for the rank and specialty needed to fill an upcoming vacancy. I did learn

later that my officer record brief was reviewed by the Assistant Commanding General for Police Development, and ultimately I was selected by the Commanding General to fill this position, but only after I was on orders to report as the senior advisor to the Minister!

I have often been asked during the past year about my training in preparation for deploying to this position and about the need and structure for pre-deployment senior advisor training. I did not receive any type of training before I arrived at Camp Eggers and, to be quite honest, I am not sure any structured training is needed, with the possible exception of basic language training. Although I was fortunate that Minister Atmar understood and spoke fluent English, this will not likely be the norm. Not knowing some of the basic words of the language hampered some of the initial coordination and relationship building with some of the Deputy Ministers. By far the best “training” I received was the good email dialog my predecessor and I established about 5 months prior to deploying, which I consider to be essential pre-deployment training for senior advisors. I was not only able to receive background on the ministry and my position, but I also received valuable “situational awareness” about the minister’s personality, habits, work related issues, strategic and government (political) initiatives, and the overall mood of the ministry. There is no structured training course that would have prepared me better to step into this position; establishing email contact early with constant flow of the current situation and issues, along with the personalities and ongoing internal issues, gave me a good base of knowledge prior to my actual posting to the position. This is an essential requirement of the transition process because, ultimately, it is all personality driven. The senior advisor must have the ability to recognize and assess different personalities, and be able to prepare and adjust one’s own personality, if needed to be effective.

The First 90 Days.

Before starting the first day at the ministry, roles and responsibilities must be delineated and established between the advisor and his/her rater and overall supported leadership. In my case, this did not happen, most likely because few individuals understand what advisors are supposed to do, or how best to utilize them. It is important for the advisors to not only build a strong relationship with the minister based on trust and confidence, but it is equally important for senior leaders to build strong relationships with the advisors. Sitting down to cover roles and responsibilities and what is expected is critical.

The distinction between an advisor and a mentor must be clarified and standardized. Many individuals used both advisor and mentor to describe my duties. Although this may seem like a trivial issue, it means a lot to the Afghans that they know the difference. For instance, the definition of an advisor is “a person who provides advice, usually with some type of professional certification,” whereas a mentor is defined as “a teacher or tutor.” At no time did I or the minister ever think of me as his “teacher or tutor,” but yet many people would refer to me as his mentor, which, if the minister was

in the same room, he would abruptly inform everyone that he does not have a mentor, but rather an advisor. We must come to grips with standard terminology not only in respect to the senior government officials that we are advising, but also for clarification of our own mission. Roles and responsibilities vary, depending on the personality and needs of the minister; the advisor must always be flexible.

To become proficient in any job takes time, but to become proficient in a job that has many variables can take even longer. Senior advisors often have multiple duties, depending on the minister and the directives from higher headquarters. As a senior advisor, one can be seen as a liaison officer, military assistant, confidant, speech writer, preparing the minister for key leader engagements, synchronizing the calendar with the executive staff, and overall coordinator for numerous projects or initiatives involving the Deputy Ministers and other staff of the ministry. Based on my experience and those of others, it will take between 60 to 90 days to gain trust and confidence, thus becoming “effective” with the minister. Again, depending upon personalities, it may take less or more time but on average, 60 to 90 days, which leaves the senior advisor about 9 months before the minister receives a replacement to start the “trust and confidence” building period all over again.

Lessons Learned After The First 90 Days.

The following 10 months reaffirmed the fact that there is no “template” or “cookie cutter” training for an advisor; effective job execution is largely driven by the Minister’s personality. If necessary, it is imperative for the advisor to adapt to the minister in order to be effective. Although there may be a need to adapt to the minister’s personality, the advisor must also remember that he or she must effectively work and synchronize both “worlds” – the ministry and the Coalition; in effect, the advisor has many different “bosses” to whom he must answer on a daily basis.

The daily battle rhythm would most always include engaging with the minister and then key personnel from ISAF, IJC, and NTM-A/CSTC-A. Even though my boss was the Assistant Commanding General for Police Development, I was often answering or coordinating actions from COMISAF himself, or his staff, with the Minister and his staff. I also had to work with the ministry’s operations and planning staff to ensure the Minister’s intent and direction was reflected in IJC initiatives or orders. The senior advisor to the MoI must also “unofficially” gather and lead all advisors assigned to the ministry to work effectively as a team. This may become problematic at times with contractors who have a different reporting chain of command however; I have found this technique to produce very good results. The senior advisor not only leads the team at the ministry, but also oversees many of the different functional areas. It is because of the important daily observations that the senior advisor must be included in any advisor/mentor adjustments. Currently, we have many advisors and mentors that are doubled up on certain Deputy Ministers and directorate chiefs. A true “troops to task” list needs to be developed to efficiently use all assigned advisors and mentors. Not only should Coalition senior leaders depend on their senior advisors for advice on the

number of subordinate advisors and mentors, the minister's priorities, and the outlook on certain initiatives, but they should also depend on their senior advisors for what we have termed "reverse atmospherics."

"Reverse Atmospherics."

The purpose of reverse atmospherics is to emphasize the senior advisor's role in communicating to the rest of the force the importance of knowing how to treat and engage with our Afghan Senior Leaders. It has been my experience that there appears to be a tendency to take the Afghan Senior Leaders for granted, for example, by not affording them the same kind of courtesies that we extend to our own senior officials. This is apparent in the manner in which we schedule meetings, trips, and the way some of our Coalition staff, who do not often interact with the Afghans, let their attitudes interfere with the level of honor and respect afforded to the Afghan leaders. Scheduling trips and only offering them "a seat or two if we can squeeze them in," while providing numerous "strap hanger" seats for the Coalition, sends a very negative message. This is where the senior advisor can provide a reverse atmospheric back to the Coalition leadership to help them realize the potential damage that certain policies or behaviors may cause. Many times, these actions are unintentional, but they create ill will nonetheless. Another example is when our senior leaders arrive for a key leader engagement and their staff has not provided the Minister with a read-ahead packet or an agenda to enable him to adequately prepare; would we do the same with our Secretary of Defense? Another example is when we use PowerPoint for briefing plans and concepts. The Afghans are not comfortable with PowerPoint briefings, they prefer to execute actions based on written plans (like our Operations Orders or Plans). Yet, even after being made aware of this cultural difference, our senior leadership would continue to use slides, many times to little or no effect. I believe that our senior leaders can more effectively use their senior advisors by requesting and listening to these types of reverse atmospherics. I have also found through my experiences that Afghans can detect, and likewise have respect, for what I call "real people." They are extremely capable of determining if Coalition a member is sincere or not, and if they are truly championing a program that they intend to see through to success. Consequently, I found being open, honest, sincere, and, most of all, being yourself, will cause the Afghans to respect you and to embrace you as "family."

Post Senior Advisor Contributions.

It is a shame that many senior advisors will go on to new duty assignments that will have nothing to do with the experiences that were learned during their 12+ months of senior advisor duty. The U.S. DoD needs to consider "utilizing" the knowledge and experience gained by these former senior advisors by creating a program where their knowledge of the minister, ministry, and how it functions with Coalition partners will be imparted to future senior advisors. For example, post-utilization tours should be

seriously considered and endorsed by the DoD and, if nothing else, a system should be established to enable some type of “reach back” to tap the knowledge and experiences of former senior advisors as needed.

This paper may not address weighty or earth-shattering issues or lessons learned, but the few key areas that are addressed above constitute a good foundation for effective communication, understanding, and true partnership. We are faced with a complex mission. Many programs and developments will be difficult and take time. Nothing is more important than establishing a true, honest working relationship and a level of understanding with our Afghan partners to further these programs and initiatives. I have seen progress over the past 13 months that leaves me with hope that the Afghans will soon start taking on more responsibilities for their own security. Taking advantage of the experiences gained by former senior advisors will go a long way toward facilitating further progress.

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