
Challenges of a Military Advisor

by

Major General William H. Riley Jr., US Army

[The following is an authorized reprint of an article which was originally published in *Military Review*, November 1988, pp. 34-42. *Military Review* is published by the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, Fort Leavenworth KS]

The purpose of this article is twofold: to advocate a patient, tolerant, and more participative approach to the role of military advisor; and to highlight the role played by cultural factors and the importance of achieving a satisfactory cultural adjustment.

The scene is a field training exercise (FTX) near the town of Najran, bordering the vast desert of the *Rub' al-Khali* (the Empty Quarter) in Saudi Arabia. In my role as the project manager for the Saudi Arabian National Guard (SANG) Modernization Program, I was serving as the counterpart to the [Saudi] four-star chief of military operations (CMO). SANG had deployed two brigades with support elements and almost 10,000 troops in a very demanding and challenging desert environment, driving more than 3,000 vehicles in extreme trafficability conditions.

My mission for the day was, I thought, to guide the CMO by vehicle over hundreds of kilometers to visit logistics elements in the rear of the SANG 2d Brigade. I considered myself at that time a seasoned desert warrior--fully checked out on our new Loran navigation gear, equipped with an electric vehicle compass and state-of-the-art communications gear. On the other hand, I knew my counterpart had no compass, no navigation gear, no maps, and no communications with anyone but me. Imagine my surprise when from the very onset, the CMO struck off in the lead, travelling at a high rate of speed in a direction that my Loran told me was not the proper azimuth. I was immediately thrust into the role of "leading from behind," struggling on the move to reconcile our current location with where we should be heading to remain on the Loran course. As I juggled the odometer reading with azimuths and map location, and as I updated Loran location with compass readings and distances, the atmosphere in my vehicle was punctuated with harsh words that should not be translated into Arabic. My interpreter/driver was harangued by my constant irritation over having to set course correction and give position updates while bounding over sand dunes at a high rate of speed and trying to keep all the equipment in the vehicle from becoming deadly missiles.

Inevitably, our vehicle began to run low on gas and finally became stuck in the soft desert sand. The CMO doubled back and immediately began giving instructions in Arabic. It was at this time that my real education in desert operations began.

I was soon to learn that even though my counterpart did not possess high-technology equipment, his wealth of knowledge in desert travel more than made up for the difference. From childhood he had traveled with camel caravans all over the kingdom and was an experienced trade-route traveler and guide even as a young adult. He had joined the Frontier Forces and amassed some 25 years of service in traveling over desert routes in the kingdom. Whereas I was tied to navigation gear when confronted with the lack of terrain features in the desert, he was guided by the sun, dune directions, previous vehicle tracks on the desert, and other factors unknown to me at the time. In short, I soon realized that in spite of my advantage in technological equipment, my counterpart was truly an expert in desert travel, and rather than being the leader, I had much to learn in the role of being led.

From this experience, I began to reflect on my overall role as an advisor. Could it be possible that by sometimes seeking to impose American doctrine, equipment, and procedures, I could actually be stifling unique Saudi experience or beneficial ways of accomplishing the same task? In the year and a half that has passed since that FTX, I believe I have come to the realization that many times problems can be solved more efficiently by blending American solutions with Saudi solutions. A spin-off is that when our counterparts feel that they are leading and participating, rather than being directed, a halo effect is achieved. Human nature is such that when we are allowed to do it "our way" (maybe with a little extra help from our friends), we feel better about the results achieved. My purpose for writing this article, then, is to advocate a more participative role for the advisor, rather than an authoritarian relationship.

It should be no surprise that national character, customs, and perceptions affect the way tasks are undertaken. Apart from the language barrier, each culture imposes its own values on the communication process. In spite of this obvious fact, many of us naively believe that all we need is a competent interpreter to bridge the gap between cultures. Many times during negotiations, I have heard corporate representatives say in exasperated tones, "Just tell him what I said, then he will understand." Sometimes it takes a paragraph to convey a meaning in Arabic that only required two sentences in English, and vice versa. My point here is that if an advisor is to truly enter a partnership with his counterpart in achieving results, then he must take into account cultural differences and compensate.

As Americans, we are viewed by Arabs as too aggressive and pushy. We are overly concerned with time to produce results. We are ever present with our check lists, our milestone schedules, stochastic decision trees, and our PERT (Program Evaluation and Review Technique) charts. We use incomprehensible acronyms and speak in a shorthand that is resistant to translation. We have standing operating procedures and directives for the most minute tasks. We despise the committee method--we would agree that a camel is really a horse designed by a committee. We are irreverent, aggressive workaholics who press for results at any cost. We find it difficult to work in an ambiguous environment in which information is not always open and forthcoming, because our military experience has generally been in a framework of fairly well-defined objectives, clear direction, and a precise chain of command. We tend to want to tally results and press for a quick victory.

I believe that there are five aspects to the job of being an advisor:

- Advice and Assistance.
- Evaluation of Contractors.
- Assessment of Counterparts.
- Identification/Articulation of Requirements.
- Concept Development and Planning.

Most advisors do well on the basic task of rendering advice and assistance. Service to the customer, in terms of responding to requests and giving subject matter expertise, is our strong suit. Of course, this task involves bringing some background to the job, plus gaining extra experience to perform the job, as well as obtaining the trust and confidence of the counterpart. Particularly in Arab countries, an individual can be judged more in terms of his friendship and personal manner, rather than solely on his professional expertise. So it is important to make friends concurrently with conducting business. Drinking a cup of tea, discussing the weather, and healthy discussions of politics may be necessary to set the tone for more substantive discussions. Undeniably, this seemingly "frivolous" activity may consume time, but this is time well spent, since it dictates the climate of the relationship--not only for personal friendships, but also for country-to-country relations.

The second task of evaluating contractors may not be applicable in some countries, but in our case, and in consideration of declining personnel strengths in the US Army, it was necessary to use contractor-hired, retired military to assist in training the Saudis in modernization procedures. Again, we are comfortable in the role of being contractor technical representatives, and our military personnel are very capable in evaluating contractor training efforts.

However, the next three tasks require constant reemphasis and attention, because in the press of day-to-day activity, the more long-range aspects of being an advisor are sometimes neglected. Our mission is to provide services to our counterparts--training, materiel, publications, maintenance, spare parts, doctrine, or whatever. My point here is that unless the next three functions are performed, the project tends to lose its direction and may wander aimlessly toward rather undefined goals.

First, we must constantly assess the progress of our counterparts. This requires that there be evaluations and reports. In our case, we have Saudi versions of the Army Training and Evaluation Program, tactical exercises without troops, and unit/materiel readiness reports. Honesty in reporting is important, and corrective action must be businesslike, non-confrontational, and professional.

Next, the advisor must look beyond the trees to the forest--he must put the pieces together into a meaningful identification of requirements, and these should be both short range and long range. He should capture these requirements in writing and then assemble them into a frank assessment of what can be accomplished in the short term versus what must be deferred for later actions. Of course, many factors must be considered, including budget, politics, doctrine, contracts, recruiting, manpower, and possibly many more.

Finally, the requirements should be developed into a concept, and planning should be organized into a master plan. It is here that counterpart relationships become the foundation for success. If the master plan has been worked out solely by Americans, it has little chance of success. It must be a joint plan and the building-block method must be followed in developing the master plan. Briefings and agreement should proceed from the bottom upward. When all counterparts, from company through battalion and brigade to the headquarters, can articulate the master plan and how it relates to them, the plan is a success. Not only does the master plan organize the efforts of the participants, but it is the concrete evidence of joint agreement. Whenever divergence from the plan is suggested in some nonproductive direction, all elements can point to the plan as a well-thought-out prescription for progress.

Of course, it is simplistic to suggest that these five aspects of the advisor job are all inclusive or that the task of fulfilling them will be easy. Therefore, I will go on to point out some pitfalls in getting the job done.

This business of acclimatizing one's style of doing business and adapting to the host country's customs and courtesies can be difficult for many Americans. However, it has been my observation that almost no one fails in the job over here because of lack of technical background and professional expertise. Conversely, many Americans do fail because of a lack of skill in interpersonal relations. They simply do not "hit it off" with their counterparts and therefore do not develop the trust, confidence, and rapport that are the necessary foundation for doing business in this part of the world, or any other for that matter.

In making their adjustment to Saudi culture, Americans I have observed pass through four stages, which I label the four A's: astonishment, allurements, antagonism, and accommodation. Of the stages, only accommodation is truly a measure of successful adjustment, and each of the other stages is dangerous in terms of jeopardizing project success.

The first stage, astonishment, is typical of newcomers to the Saudi Arabian culture. No amount of prior coaching can prepare the newcomer for the culture shock that awaits him. At first, he spends the majority of his time trying to get his internal biological clock adjusted (Saudi Arabia is half a world away, 8 to 12 hours ahead of America, and celebrates its weekend on Thursday/Friday). Then he is confronted with the jumble of strange-sounding names, the prayer calls five times a day that halt all activity, and other customs that seem so alien to a Westerner. The newcomer spends an inordinate amount of time trying to learn the rules of the game: do not show the soles of your feet to your neighbor when sitting; shake your teacup to indicate you have had enough, and never overstay your welcome with more than three cups, and so forth. Some people never get out of this stage of astonishment. They always look like Alice in Wonderland with a quizzical look on their faces and with a timid manner, afraid that their every act will offend someone. Obviously, this is a stage at which we should not linger very long, and most Saudis are perfectly willing to forgive unintentional social gaffes.

The second stage, allurement, is commonly called "going native." Those people arrested at this stage are just enchanted by all the quaint customs and neat goings on around them. They spend all their time learning the language, studying about the religion of Islam, and attending various cultural activities. While I would encourage a healthy desire to learn about the culture and courtesies of our counterparts, I would also discourage abandoning our own culture. When our counterpart criticizes America for some aspect of our foreign policy, we should not immediately agree with him and heap abuse on our native land. After all, he may genuinely be interested in what our government's rationale might be for the policy under discussion. Also, the kingdom has always appreciated American assistance because it is a product of a modern, technological society and its advanced, progressive army. For these reasons, it is not a satisfactory adjustment if we "go native" and abandon the good old American work ethic and values.

The third stage, antagonism, is much more insidious. In a foreign society, isolation and "barracks fever" may creep up and foster a negativism that pervades our relationships with people and interferes with the work environment. When it is 152 degrees Fahrenheit on your front porch, it is difficult to put a smiley face on your surroundings. Even those people with the most positive attitudes will have slumps and will occasionally be troubled by the cultural differences. Rather than dwelling on the negative, it is sometimes helpful to tally up the positive aspects of the tour, because if one practices being miserable, it will color his dealings with other people and may ultimately result in failure. The worst feature about the antagonism stage is that people seem to naturally return to this cycle periodically, and a regular ration of "pep talks" seems to be necessary. Human nature being what it is, all of us have our low points and the little "dissatisfiers" mount up to major embarrassments if not checked.

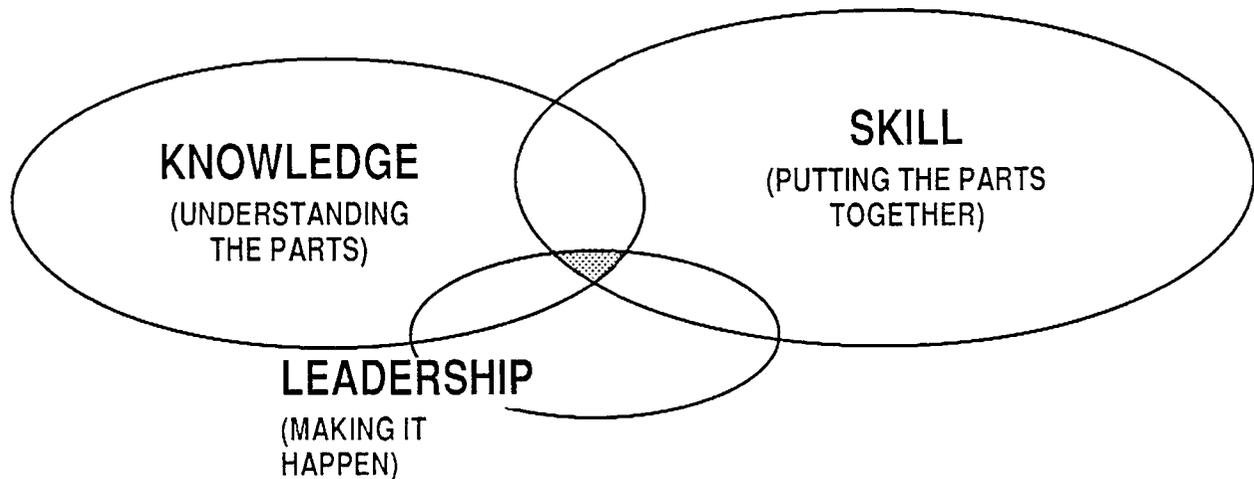
Finally, it should be our goal to reach the accommodation stage--the realization that we and our counterparts do not share the same belief systems and culture, but that we can be friends and colleagues both as individuals and as nations. Our Saudi friends may never understand the American preoccupation with check lists, milestone schedules, and time management, but they can accept our ways and vice versa. In my own case, I have a healthy respect for Saudi values, but I also am strengthened in the admiration of my own country's values. The point is not to run a scorecard, but rather to reach an accommodation and be considerate in weighing the differences in national ways of doing things.

There is a continuum of action in adapting to a new culture which varies between two extremes: at one end would be an aggressive, confrontational attitude geared to get results at any cost; the other extreme would be personable but passive behavior.

Sometimes the new advisor proceeds on a course of "proving himself"--he feels he has only 30 days to get on board and start producing results. He has little patience with small talk and he

considers any education in Arabic greetings or customs and courtesies to be boring and unnecessary. On the other hand, sometimes the new guy swings the opposite way--he is personable, passive, and just a nice guy. He drinks tea and chats amiably about the weather, politics, and so forth. I believe that we should chart a course about midway in the continuum--being personable, calm, patient, nonconfrontational, but also concerned about progress and genuine results. The need for a persistent and coherent approach to achieving results cannot be overemphasized.

Venn diagram on cultural adjustment



As a way of summarizing what I have discussed, it may be useful to view how culture affects leadership within the framework of a Venn diagram, employing circles to represent the relations between sets and how they interact during operations. In our case for Saudi Arabia, the environment shapes the size of each circle and its relationship to the other circles. So let us consider the relationship between three circles.

- Knowledge
- Skill
- Leadership

I define knowledge as understanding all the parts of each problem. This is difficult in Saudi Arabia because of language problems and because of the time it takes for our Saudi friends to become trustful enough to be open and forthcoming with us. Earlier I called attention to what I believe are the five tasks of an adviser: advising/assisting, evaluating, assessing, identifying/articulating, and planning. My point here is that only by doing all five functions can we acquire knowledge and understanding of the parts. Therefore, this is a medium-size circle.

Leadership is defined as "making it happen." Obviously, an aggressive, confrontational, "results at any cost" mentality will be counterproductive with our Saudi counterparts. A "General Patton" would probably be a miserable failure in developing rapport and achieving progress with the Saudis. A "take the hill" kind of attitude that attempts to tally quick results will not work well in the Saudi environment. Therefore, I am making this a small circle, in the belief that we should "lead from behind" and encourage our Saudi counterparts to take the prominent role in planning, coordinating, directing, and controlling their own projects.

Finally, the largest circle in the Venn diagram is devoted to skill--the understanding of how to put the parts together. Skill is derived from our doing our homework, strategizing the issues to be presented, learning to deal with ambiguity and accessibility, and from controlling our own attitude and that of our subordinates. It results from attaining an "accommodation" stage in our adjustment

to culture. This can only be done by exercising patience, by developing rapport, trust, and confidence with our counterpart, and by adopting the behavior of relentless pursuit of results, albeit patiently and in small doses.

The circles in the diagram must overlap and interrelate in the course of our interaction with our counterparts in Saudi Arabia. In other words, those areas where the circles are not joined represent actions where our knowledge, leadership, and skill are nonproductive. Therefore, we must tailor these three factors to the environment and culture in which we operate. In the final analysis, then, it has been my experience that by "leading from behind," while the Saudis exercise their own leadership, we can better assist in producing the desired results. The best part of this whole equation is that our counterparts will feel better about the results, and we will share in the pride of accomplishment.

A leader is best when people barely know he exists--not so good when people obey and acclaim him, worse when they despise them. But of a good leader, who talks little--when his work is done, his aim fulfilled, they will say: "We did it ourselves."

Lao-tzu

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Major General William H. Riley Jr is deputy commanding general, Third US Army, Fort McPherson, Georgia. He received a B.A. from Bowdoin College, and M.B.A. from the University of Rhode Island, and is a graduate of the Naval War College. He has served in a variety of command and staff positions in the Middle East such as chief of staff, Multinational Peacekeeping Force in the Sinai, chief air defense advisor to the Saudi army, and project manager, Saudi Arabian National Guard Modernization Program.