

# RECOGNIZING NEGOTIATING TRAITS: A JUNIOR LEADER'S ABILITY TO SUCCESSFULLY CONDUCT KLEs

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*“(Successful negotiation) is the art of letting the other party have things your way.”*

— Daniele Vare  
Italian diplomat

Over the last decade of conducting counterinsurgency (COIN) operations, the Army's junior officers (JOs) have faced a number of challenges. Among them is the key leader engagement (KLE) process, in which JOs have found it necessary to negotiate and build relationships with a wide variety of local tribal, government, and armed forces officials. Despite the end of our involvement in Iraq and the beginning of the drawdown of forces in Afghanistan, it is reasonable to suspect that JOs will need to conduct similar KLEs in future operations. Looming budget cuts and the large number of simultaneous commitments that the Army will have to manage means that Army leaders will be expected to do more with less. Under these conditions, the importance of strong relationships and “soft power” influence with local national leaders will exponentially have to increase, as fewer troops and resources stretch commanders' abilities to accomplish our mission objectives solely utilizing coercion and force.

JOs must therefore actively seek to improve their skills of building and maintaining relationships with local officials in their commanders' areas of operations (AOs). While we saw that limited attempts have been made to introduce KLEs to pre-deployment training requirements, current literature mostly focuses on the KLE process as it relates to targeting or on general KLE tactics rather than as it relates to the particular capabilities and limitations of junior Army officers.

The bulk of these KLEs have taken place within operating environments that are high-context cultures. JOs have to realize the nature of the meetings they are conducting and understand their own American tendencies just as much as they understand their foreign counterpart. If JOs can grasp a better understanding of the negotiating process between different cultures, the knee-jerk reactions to fixing problems can be minimized. This article will argue that when operating in high-context cultures, our own cultural traits put us at a disadvantage when conducting KLEs. A few strategies will then be discussed that JOs can utilize to mitigate this disadvantage.



Photo by LT Chad A. Dulac, USN

*Soldiers tour the grounds of a high school with the school's director of education during a key leader engagement in the Farah Province of Afghanistan on 2 July 2013.*

## Definitions

**Key leader engagement** — the sustained process of building a professional connection with local national officials for the purpose of gaining their cooperation in fulfilling the commander's intent.

**Culture** — the characteristics of a particular group of people, distinct by shared experiences.

## Low Context vs. High Context Cultures

Generally speaking, America is a low-context culture where relationships are based on achieving a goal in the shortest time possible. A low-context setting is one in which verbal communication is the key, the message is clear and informative, and meetings are fast paced. Asian and Middle Eastern cultures are usually identified as high-context cultures. They are much keener on building relationships, and indirect communication is just as important as direct communication. In meetings, the actual process of achieving a goal takes a backseat to the art of building a relationship.

## The Foundation: American Strategic Culture

Field Manual (FM) 3-0, *Operations*, states: “Cultural awareness helps identify points of friction within populations, helps build rapport, and reduces misunderstandings.” Most of the Army's cultural awareness training focuses on the cultures that exist within our current operating environments; however, we also need to be



Photo by HMC Josh Ives, USN

*A security force platoon leader for Provincial Reconstruction Team Farah greets a Farahi man as he walks to a key leader engagement in Farah City, Afghanistan, on 10 April 2013.*

aware of our own cultural traits in order to appropriately manage any cultural biases that may put us at a disadvantage while operating within other cultures.

Our nation has developed a “strategic culture” that has become a collective identity that determines appropriate means to achieving security objectives. Since the military is one of the primary means of achieving these objectives, the military — the Army in particular — has come to reflect its society. America’s strategic culture has been shaped by geographic security and inspired with exceptionalism, and has in turn affected our outlook on the world. This becomes very evident in our negotiations within other cultures.

From our founding, we have seen ourselves as exceptional and are optimistic for it. This optimism gives us the belief that we can change the nature of another’s system. Just as Americans as a whole exhibit certain traits related to the U.S.’s foreign endeavors, so too does the Army.

A historical tendency has always been a direct approach to strategy over an indirect, meaning swiftness is the key. This reflection can be seen throughout all of our operations, but specifically the U.S.’s strategic culture has influenced negotiating behavior, which then influences the Army leader’s negotiation behavior. The leader conducting the KLE may not even realize this is happening. In a sense, certain negotiation behavior is ingrained within us from being American.

### Negotiation Traits

When negotiating, we exhibit four distinct traits. Depending on the negotiator, these traits may not be exhibited together; they could be used in combination or singularly.

**Business-like:** A results-oriented, straightforward approach to problem solving. The solutions sought will be somewhat mutually benefitting. Negotiations will be unimpassioned yet optimistic, and feelings

are not as important as results.

**Legalistic:** Negotiations will be based on facts and professionalism. Preparation and intelligence are utilized prior to the meeting and will tend to only look at the issue at hand. This mindset believes that the other side does not have our best interest in mind.

**Moralistic:** Americans often tend to have a deep-rooted belief that we are morally superior to our counterparts and that American exceptionalism gives us a God-given reason to exert our influence on others.

**Hegemonic:** We are the mighty Army with countless resources compared to others. We have the power to do what we want, where we want. Even if this trait is not openly displayed, the other party often picks up on tendencies displayed by the fact that we come with all the resources of the U.S. military to bear.

### Avoiding Cultural Pitfalls

These inherent, low-context cultural biases cause many JOs to encounter problems when attempting to maneuver within high-context cultural environments. Based on our experiences conducting KLEs in Afghanistan, the Republic of Korea, and Iraq, we have highlighted some common pitfalls that some JOs fall into and suggest techniques to address them.

### Business-like & Legalistic: Avoiding a Transactional Relationship

It is often a struggle for any person raised in a low-context culture to avoid turning interpersonal relationships with foreign nationals into transactional relationships, especially over relatively short overseas tours. The prevailing understanding among the officer corps is that engaging with local nationals is part of the targeting process and merely a means to an end. This leads JOs to be transactional in their interactions. The line of thinking is often something like “we’re busy, and we don’t have time to drink tea and talk about irrelevant things if you can’t do something for me here and now.” Often, we also do not know exactly what a local national can provide us until

a relationship is established, and the value of a relationship can commonly grow in direct correlation to the amount of time invested in it.

Many JOs know that in current operating environments a certain amount of small talk is expected before any business should be conducted. But some JOs take this too far and feel obligated to have a specific time period of forced small talk before abruptly transitioning to the real purpose of their visit. In our experience, if the engagement seems forced and inauthentic, your counterpart will recognize this, and it is likely that your relationship will suffer. In most cases, securing an abrupt agreement to your desired outcome is probably not worth setting your relationship back a few steps. Therefore, making an effort to find shared interests with your counterpart in early engagements will likely build a stronger relationship, becoming advantageous over time.

When you are unable to meet with your counterparts, cell-phone calls will help keep your relationship from atrophying and can create a culture of communication that is not dependent on your ability to meet in person. It will help to avoid the perception that you only talk to your contact when you need something from him. An important factor to consider, however, is that many cultures pay for their cell phone time by the minute, and your counterpart might be unwilling to talk for long periods of time purely based on financial constraints. Yet, this too can be an advantage, as a counterpart that typically talks for hours in person before getting to business might want to get directly to business when speaking on the cell phone.

#### **Moralistic & Hegemonic vs. Respect**

Most of the Army's cultural awareness training centers around teaching Soldiers lists of behavioral "do's and don'ts" of the particular culture. Soldiers are usually taught things like to gesture and shake hands with only their right hand and to avoid showing locals the bottom of their feet. However, while these cultural

behaviors are important, they will only get any relationship so far. As this is frequently the focus of the training, some JOs seem to gravitate toward these physical rituals as the most important facet of personal interaction. Demonstrating respect toward foreign counterparts through cultural niceties is one thing, but showing respect through your general demeanor, tone, and conversational style is another.

The moralistic and hegemonic cultural biases sometimes contributes to a feeling that other cultures are hopelessly parochial and that we only have to follow their rituals and customs to be instantly accepted. In our experience, your general demeanor and approach to interacting with local nationals is the most important thing, regardless of where you are operating. Being a genuine, friendly, honest person seems to be behavior that permeates cultural boundaries with relative ease.

Treat every operation like an information operation in the sense that every time a patrol leaves the "wire," junior leaders must be conscious that the behavior of their patrol will influence the population you encounter and will shape the attitudes of local nationals you will interact with during future KLEs. While this is common sense, this is something junior leaders must continually emphasize to their Soldiers. For example, one tribal leader in our area bitterly recollected a past U.S. patrol refusing to apologize for tearing down his power lines. Although this occurred before our unit arrived in country, the leader continually used that event as a pretext for his refusal to cooperate.

Additionally, always make an effort to define the outcome in terms of your counterpart's goals and present the desired outcome in such a way that your counterpart views it as a matter of his own self-interest, rather than some sort of command (For example,

*Soldiers with Company B, 1st Battalion, 327th Infantry Regiment, 1st Brigade Combat Team, 101st Airborne Division, conduct a key leader engagement with local village elders on 1 March 2013 outside Forward Operating Base Finley-Shields, Afghanistan.*

Photo by SGT Jon Heinrich



“Decreasing violence along this route will significantly contribute to securing your area and prove how effective your Soldiers are to your commander,” rather than “You need to secure this route.”) Even if you do have the ability to coerce your counterpart into doing what you want, putting it in terms of his own self-interest will help build the perception that you have a relationship based on equality and mutual respect. For soft power to be truly successful, the JO will have to set an agenda where shared goals converge. Cooperation has to be emphasized through a process that convinces local nationals that both parties have the same goal. It could be quite possible that prior to this, they did have the same goal as you; they just need to be made aware of it.

Additionally, our hegemonic trait often leads us to unconsciously oversell our capabilities to our local national counterparts, and often we can't or won't deliver on these high expectations. Unfortunately, this is compounded by our country's powerful image in the world, and locals often expect things to turn around rapidly when the U.S. military arrives. Therefore, expectation management needs to be part of every engagement.

Time is also viewed differently between low- and high-context cultures. Americans view time in a linear fashion, where appointment times and schedules are very important. We are likely to interrupt whatever we are doing in order to avoid being late for something. High-context cultures see time but not the clock as important. Thus, things such as conversations, jobs, and so forth have a time of their own, and if that means that someone is late according to the clock, it is not that big of a deal. Times are more of a general guideline rather than a rigid deadline. From this understanding, it becomes incumbent on the leader to manage the differing perceptions of time and may require additional patience and allow time for a more flexible schedule.

### Conclusion

Negotiations have become an important task in the current operating environment, and our ability to change local perceptions and gain their support cannot be underestimated. Future operations will likely require JOs to conduct similar engagements,

and from what we have learned in the past decade, this could quite possibly be more important going forward. To be successful, JOs will have to set an agenda where shared goals converge and be able to recognize their own cultural biases to operate in these settings. We cannot and should not expect a foreign culture to fully understand us or change on our behalf; therefore, to be successful as JOs, we must take it upon ourselves to have the best understanding possible of the people we are dealing with to reach our desired endstates.

### Further Reading Suggestions

**“An Important Weapon in COIN Operations: The Key Leader's Engagement”** by CPT Joe Curtis (*Infantry Magazine*, July-August 2008).

This article focuses on the experience of an Infantry company conducting KLEs over the course of a year in Afghanistan. The author incorporates specific tactics, techniques, and procedures (TTPs) for conducting KLEs within the Pastun cultural context with great step-by-step advice that can be applied to any operating environment.

**“Influencing the Population: Using Interpreters, Conducting KLEs, and Executing IO in Afghanistan”** by CPT Michael Cummings (*Infantry Magazine*, May-August 2010).

This is another article from *Infantry Magazine* about effective TTPs for KLEs in Afghanistan. However, this author provides solid, in-depth advice for junior leaders on best utilizing their interpreters and should be extremely useful for leaders in all combat theaters.

**FM 3-05.401, *Civil Affairs Tactics, Techniques, and Procedures***, 5 July 2007

In Appendix, this FM lists a step-by-step approach for preparing for and executing KLEs. While it is focused on the specific operating requirements of the Civil Affairs branch and tactics for mediating between two opposing parties, it still contains information useful to junior combat-arms leaders.

**FM 3-24.2, *Tactics in Counterinsurgency***, 21 April 2009

Appendixes A through D of this FM contain a lot of great information for junior leaders, including the distilled wisdom of counterinsurgency experts David Kilcullen

and T.E. Lawrence, as well as suggestions for further reading. In particular, T.E. Lawrence's 'Twenty-Seven Articles' are still as useful as they were 100 years ago to small unit leaders interacting with people in the Arab world.

**“Challenges and Pitfalls in Key Leader Engagement”** by Jenny L. Hammervik (Swedish Defense Research Agency, September 2010, <http://www2.foi.se/rapp/foir3034.pdf>).

The terms of this research paper are too broad to provide specific advice to junior officers, but it is useful for the purpose of learning how one of our ISAF partners in Afghanistan, the Swedish armed forces, approaches the issue.

**“Negotiation in the New Strategic Context”** by David M. Tressler (The Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, August 2007, <http://www.au.af.mil/au/awc/awcgate/ssi/tressler-iraq-negot.pdf>).

This paper is an academic approach to explaining the science of negotiation and publishes recommendations for improvements to the Army's pre-deployment training in the KLE and negotiation process. It provides an academic foundation for junior leaders interested in improving their negotiating skills.

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