

You Will Accomplish Nothing: The Fundamental Challenge for Soldiers Serving as Advisors in SFABs Is Understanding Success

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“A leader is best when people barely know he exists; when his work is done, his aim fulfilled, they will say: we did it ourselves.” In this quote by the philosopher Lao Tzu, we can find the guidance that will most likely bring success for advisors in security force assistance brigades (SFABs). Applying this quote to the role of SFAB advisors brings to light the fundamental problem of advising success. SFAB leaders and individual advisors can set the conditions for true success by recognizing that success in advising is both unseen and unrealized. This creates a situation where the more an advisor pursues success the more elusive that success becomes. This problem can create intolerable levels of ambiguity, but in reality advisors can use doctrine as a foundation to make sense of the many “unknowns” in advising missions. For Soldiers and leaders who are serving or want to serve in an SFAB, the intent of this article is to showcase this problem and offer some techniques on how to address it.

Success is unseen. As the previous quote from Lao Tzu showcased, it is often best to conduct operations in ways that allow others to believe that they accomplished the task.

While some people may view this cynically and assert that this is simply one person or group taking credit for someone else’s work, my assertion is that such is a limited viewpoint. The group that says “we did it ourselves” does indeed do work. An example that illustrates this is from the 1958 book *The Ugly American*, which was written by Eugene Burdick and William Lederer. A situation in the book details how an American spouse living in a rural area of a foreign country noticed that the locals spent a significant amount of time on sweeping the outside areas around their homes. Because the local handmade tools they used were short handled, many of them, especially the elderly, walked about in a stooped manner. To address this issue, the spouse could have ordered long-handled brooms from the United States and given them to the locals for use. However, she recognized that this solution was an unsustainable one. Instead, she found that there was a better plant several miles away from her village that was better suited for making brooms with long handles. Again, instead of presenting this as a solution to the locals, she simply made her own long-handled broom and started using it. The locals noticed, asked about it, and

then went and gathered enough of the plants to make their own brooms. They also planted some of the plants in the village so that they could make new brooms whenever they needed to. So while the spouse did work at the outset, she did it in a way that allowed the locals to work also — in a self-determined way so they could say they did it themselves.

According to Army Techniques Publication (ATP) 3-07.10, *Advising Multi-Service Tactics, Techniques, and Procedures for Advising Foreign Security Forces*, “...advisors likely never please their own Service with

A Soldier with the 54th Security Force Assistance Brigade advises a Guyana Defence Force (GDF) soldier during a multinational training exercise on 15 June 2021 at Camp Stephenson, Guyana.

Photo by SPC N.W. Huertas



regard to the forces they are advising, and they never fully satisfy the demands of the FSF [foreign security forces] unit. Advisors are figuratively, and literally, caught in the middle.” It can be easier to create and present an immediate solution rather than do the protracted mental work and “soft sell” to implement a long-term solution. Doctrine highlights this challenge for advisors, as advisors are always trying to satisfy requirements from many sources. Therefore, advisors must maintain the discipline of focusing on the long-term goal. They can partially address this by using the doctrinal techniques associated with identifying objectives along with measures of performance, measures of effectiveness, and indicators to determine when they have obtained the objective. This allows leaders in SFABs to highlight progress towards success in the inevitable situation reports (SITREPs) and update briefs that units require, despite those highlights not being the usual public affairs officer (PAO)-friendly photo opportunity of a U.S. Soldier “training” a counterpart. Leaders and individual advisors can also maintain a list of “quick win” items to satisfy information requirements. For example, a team may submit a storyboard of an event with a photo of an NCO teaching a class on machine-gun emplacement. The higher headquarters could see this as a task completed, even without knowing the background work that went into the event, such as several members of the team coaxing the counterpart battalion staff members over several months to get them to synchronize time, resources, and the commander’s training guidance, all of which will allow the counterpart unit to perpetuate these types of training events on their own.

Success is unrealized. Part of the reason for creating SFABs was to establish long-term relationships with allies and partners. These relationships will arguably allow the U.S. Army to better operate with counterparts during any future operations. Therefore, advisors must operate with the understanding that it’s unlikely they will see the counterpart’s eventual success. Advisors can do tactical small unit planning and combined operations. Their primary focus is on systems and processes of the counterpart unit as they apply to working together in future conflict scenarios. Advisors spend a significant amount of time and energy in identifying the problem, developing solutions that the counterpart can realistically implement in a sustained manner, and then assessing the results of that implementation. One example is when a counterpart unit wants to change its NCO corps to make it more like ours. To truly make this happen takes years. Issues like pay, development of a professional military education system, and change in officer culture all must be dealt with in order to achieve success. Advisors working on these kinds of problems must accept that they may only solve a very small portion of the overall problem, and they may never know if the overall plan was successful or not.

Again, doctrine provides a foundation for addressing this



Photo by PFC Zoe Garbarino

Role-players talk to an advisor team leader from the 1st Security Force Assistance Brigade during a training event at the Joint Readiness Training Center at Fort Polk, LA, on 13 January 2018.

issue. As stated previously, leaders start by identifying the overall objective. Field Manual (FM) 6-0, *Commander and Staff Organization and Operations*, along with other publications, describes ways to identify problems, conduct assessments, and develop the desired end state. Leaders can set interim objectives that nest with the long-term objective. Setting these interim objectives allows the individual advisors to create a list of tangible tasks that they can plan to complete. Having this refined list provides the opportunity to plan out how best to satisfy the previously mentioned information requirements while maintaining a long-term focus.

A second aspect of how success is unrealized is in how plans change to become the counterpart’s plan. An individual advisor may develop a tentative plan, and it must then be wargamed by the team to improve it. Advisors must display the attribute of humility, one of many applicable competencies and attributes from the Army’s Leader Requirements Model (Army Doctrine Publication 6-22, *Army Leadership and the Profession*), as their plan changes over time. That plan then must change and become the counterpart’s plan. When finally implemented, it may look very little like the original idea. Advisors must accept this and remain focused on the counterpart’s long-term success, not their own individual role in that success. Again, this is not a new idea for Soldiers. After action reviews often start with the reminder of “no thin skins.” The intent of that statement is to tactfully remind participants of the usefulness of constructive criticism. Soldiers who want to serve as advisors must be able to embrace this idea in order to achieve both personal and mission success.

Success is elusive. I have described ways where success looks different as an SFAB advisor. Now I want to describe some ways that Soldiers can operate that are more likely to bring about true success when compared with more

typical methods. First, advisors must reframe their understanding of the mission. Arguably, examples from Vietnam to Afghanistan showcase the pitfalls of mainly focusing on tactical tasks and small unit operations without a complementary effort to build long-term viability. Advisors should reframe their mindset from “What can I teach my counterpart?” to “What does my counterpart need to be successful when I’m no longer here?” For example, instead of identifying that a counterpart’s unit marksmanship program is not up to U.S. Army standards and therefore running a U.S. Army-style range, the advisor should try a different way. This may be an iterative process with the counterpart that identifies the value (or lack thereof) of marksmanship excellence in the unit or the reason behind current marksmanship qualifications (e.g., a lack of weapons or ammunition or no system to reserve training resources). This work is often done one on one, behind closed doors. It is therefore not as easy to highlight but is arguably more valuable for long-term success.

Second, leaders in SFABs must recognize the work that advisors are doing and have a plan to report it to a higher headquarters. SITREPs and storyboards are the usual medium, so don’t fight the format — work with it. Using the previous marksmanship example, instead of a photo showing an advisor teaching preliminary marksmanship instruction to a counterpart as part of machine-gun training, leaders could instead show a picture of an advisor and counterpart discussing range fans on a map. This second option could have a caption that highlights that they are working together, not one teaching the other. This is especially important for publicly released photos, as the messaging to the public is a factor for the counterpart. Keeping with this example, the

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accompanying SITREP could highlight the multiple internal planning sessions that shaped the overt interactions with the counterpart and ultimately ensured that the marksmanship training happened.

In summary, success for SFAB advisors represents a unique challenge in comparison to other conventional forces assignments in that true success must appear to be the work of the counterpart. This means that advisor successes are typically unseen, and at the individual and team level success is often unrealized. SFAB leaders and individual advisors can combat this ambiguity by reframing how they approach the mission and how they highlight progress.

Serving in an SFAB can be a unique and rewarding assignment, both in spite of and because of the challenges that I’ve mentioned. To achieve success during this assignment, I recommend SFAB Soldiers start with the following fundamental, though counterintuitive, principle: the more actively you pursue success, the more elusive that success becomes. Critics may argue that advisors are still pursuing success, just in a different form. I don’t disagree. Instead, I am attempting to make the point that how we pursue that success is critical. True success is most likely when it appears that the counterpart achieved it. While it will likely feel uncomfortable, I suggest a return to the title of this article — you will accomplish nothing. And as odd as it may seem, your goal is to accomplish nothing because that maximizes what your counterparts are able to accomplish.



U.S. Army photo

A 2nd Security Force Assistance Brigade advisor and Ghana Armed Forces members discuss a practical exercise at Kamina Barracks, Ghana, in November 2021.

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