

# Command Sergeant Major's Corner

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## CULTURAL AWARENESS — WINNING AT THE TACTICAL LEVEL

At the tactical level, our NCO leaders must understand and emphasize the importance of cultural awareness and its potential impact on operations. Squad leaders and platoon sergeants routinely interact face-to-face with Iraqi and Afghani citizens, sometimes on a daily basis, and more importantly they lead and influence our Soldiers who do the same. This is why it is imperative they are sensitive to the potential impact of their actions as well as those of the Soldiers they train and lead.

It is now commonplace for many, if not most, platoon and company level operations to include Iraqi police or army personnel, and these operations demand that Soldiers be sensitive to the implications of their interaction with local forces. We send a strong signal to insurgents when it is obvious that American and Iraqi or Afghani Soldiers work well together. When American Soldiers demonstrate basic professional respect and courtesy towards each other and our counterparts alike, it sends a strong message. It tells the insurgents that now they have to fight a unified, allied component in the new Iraq or Afghanistan. Additionally, our Iraqi and Afghani NCO counterparts watch the way we treat our own subordinates, and our interaction with our subordinates communicates our values and attitudes towards them, both positive and negative. Whether we like it or not, we are sending that message, and we need to make sure it is a positive, consistent one. This is extremely important, and will become even more so as those countries look to our Army as the standard as they go about developing their own NCO corps.

In addition to the ever-increasing proportion of combined operations, brigade combat teams are also increasing their role in training our allies. We are training Iraqi Army and Afghan National Army forces as well as police forces in cities and on the border. U.S. units determine what training is necessary and augment transition team training to develop local forces in their area of operation; however, regardless of the type of training, one common aspect is that American NCOs are likely to be heavily involved as primary trainers or in coaching roles. Our NCOs can have a huge positive impact on local forces if they are not only culturally aware, but also culturally proficient. I submit that NCOs are already developing and employing this higher level of awareness as they interact with local forces, both in a training role and during combined patrols. Another way our Soldiers, NCOs, and officers are developing and demonstrating higher levels of cultural awareness is by enrolling in language training. Soldiers' foreign language skills may be rudimentary at first, but they will steadily improve and their efforts will not go unnoticed.

When we attempt to communicate with our counterparts in their

native tongue, we demonstrate respect toward their culture, and Soldiers are leveraging Army e-Learning to enhance their ability to communicate in the local languages. For example, language instruction

“has been available on Army e-Learning since November 2005, and over 115,000 Soldiers have spent 600,000 hours studying Rosetta Stone's 30 languages. In just three OIF and OEF related languages (Arabic, Farsi, and Pashto), Soldiers have completed 90,000 hours of language training,” according to the December 4, 2007, issue of *STAND-TO*. I encourage squad leaders and platoon sergeants to explore this opportunity for their Soldiers' development; it is an opportunity that will both enhance the Soldiers' professional development and increase the lethality of our formations.

In the early days of OIF and OEF, cultural awareness training was rudimentary, focusing on bare fundamentals and consisting of little more than what gestures to avoid and a few key phrases. Today our infantrymen are learning languages online and applying their skills while working side-by-side with Iraqi and Afghan soldiers in training and in combat. While nobody is forcing them to develop language skills, they are using their own initiative because they understand that their newfound language skills and cultural awareness will enable them to do their jobs more effectively. As we develop our Soldiers and subordinate leaders, we should recognize cultural awareness training as a means toward developing cultural adaptability, which is one of the eight dimensions of adaptive performance, as outlined by Elaine D. Pulakos, David W. Dorsey, and Rose A. Mueller-Hanson in a Society for Industrial and Organizational Psychology presentation in April 2005. The other seven dimensions are: handling emergencies or crisis situations; learning work tasks, technologies, and procedures; handling work stress; demonstrating interpersonal adaptability; solving problems creatively, dealing effectively with unpredictable or changing work situations; and demonstrating physically oriented adaptability.

The Infantry School trains flexible, adaptive leaders, and nowhere are these traits more important than in developing and sustaining cultural awareness. Infantrymen have proven themselves to be highly adaptive throughout the global war on terrorism, and the cultural awareness we are developing today will pay great dividends as we and our allies bring this war to a successful conclusion.

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