

# Strategies for Developing and Practicing Cross-Cultural Expertise in the Military

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*Cultural understanding doesn't just help you achieve your objectives—it helps you discover what your objectives should be.*

— General Anthony Zinni

**I**N THE CURRENT operating environment, mission success relies on the ability to improve relationships with foreign individuals, organizations, or militaries. Service personnel tend to deploy to a variety of areas in the world throughout their careers and are only assigned to certain jobs and locations for relatively short periods. They need efficient, effective ways to acquire a culture and language capability. The notion of cross-cultural competence (3C) has been developed to reflect this requirement.<sup>1</sup> One definition of it is “the ability to quickly and accurately comprehend, then appropriately and effectively engage individuals from distinct cultural backgrounds to achieve the desired effect, despite not having an in-depth knowledge of the other culture.”<sup>2</sup>

In the last few years, we have undertaken a number of research projects aimed at understanding 3C in the military. We have had the privilege of interviewing many warfighters from the Army, Marine Corps, and Air Force, warrior-diplomats who spent years interacting and building relationships with their foreign counterparts in different parts of the world as a part of their assignments. (Henceforth, we refer to them as “cross-cultural experts.”) Reflecting on our research, we noticed that cross-cultural experts develop certain *mental strategies or habits that help them learn about new cultures quickly*. Such mental habits can be adopted and practiced by anyone, at any level of military command. In the spirit of Stephen R. Covey’s *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, the primary intent of this article is to provide practical descriptions of these mental strategies, illustrated by operational examples and supported by the research literature.<sup>3</sup>

The seven mental habits organize around three metacognitive strategies—i.e., strategies for thinking about and reflecting on one’s own thinking: adopting a cross-culturalist stance, seeking and extending cultural understanding, and applying cultural understanding to guide action. In the following, we will

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PHOTO: CPT Ryan Casper, U.S. Army Reserve, 5th Kandak Embedded Training Team, discusses school-supply drop logistics with an Afghan National Army mentee in northern Afghanistan, 2009. (photo courtesy of author)

discuss each of the seven habits (see Figure 1) and how they relate to metacognitive awareness.

## Adopting a Cross-Culturalist Stance

**1. Know yourself and how you are different.** Cross-cultural experts are aware that they see the world in a particular way because of their background, personal history, and culture. They anticipate that, in an interaction with someone who has a different background, the perspectives each person brings to the situation will likely not match. General Zinni, an exceptional warrior-diplomat and cross-cultural expert, noted in an interview:

The natural instinct for us is to see a fact and interpret it in our context, and not to say, my understanding of this—my context might not be the right one to interpret this fact. And that may be the most significant thing—that fact, that act, that decision, or that response—how do you do the interpretation? That’s the real cultural question. Do I do it through my prism, or do I try to understand another prism which will give me more clarity and [bring me] closer to truth?

Recognizing this mismatch leads cross-cultural experts to explore commonalities and differences between themselves and the people within their area of operations. Experience living in multiple locations often leads them to develop theories about how Americans differ from other people in the world.

Cultural researchers seek to frame such differences objectively.<sup>4</sup> Cross-cultural experts instead learn to frame these differences in terms of how *they themselves* are different. For example, they note that most of the world does not operate on the same timelines as Americans do. A Marine Corps colonel told us—

When I would ask about the Taliban to try to find out when was the last time they had been intimidated by them, received a night letter or whatever, they would say, “Well, it was a while ago.” And getting the clear sense for how long ago that was, in relation to time, was difficult; they still remembered it like it was yesterday and they don’t have calendars; *you can’t go in there and ask what day of the month it was*. But, I knew they were very agricultural so I used crop-cycles

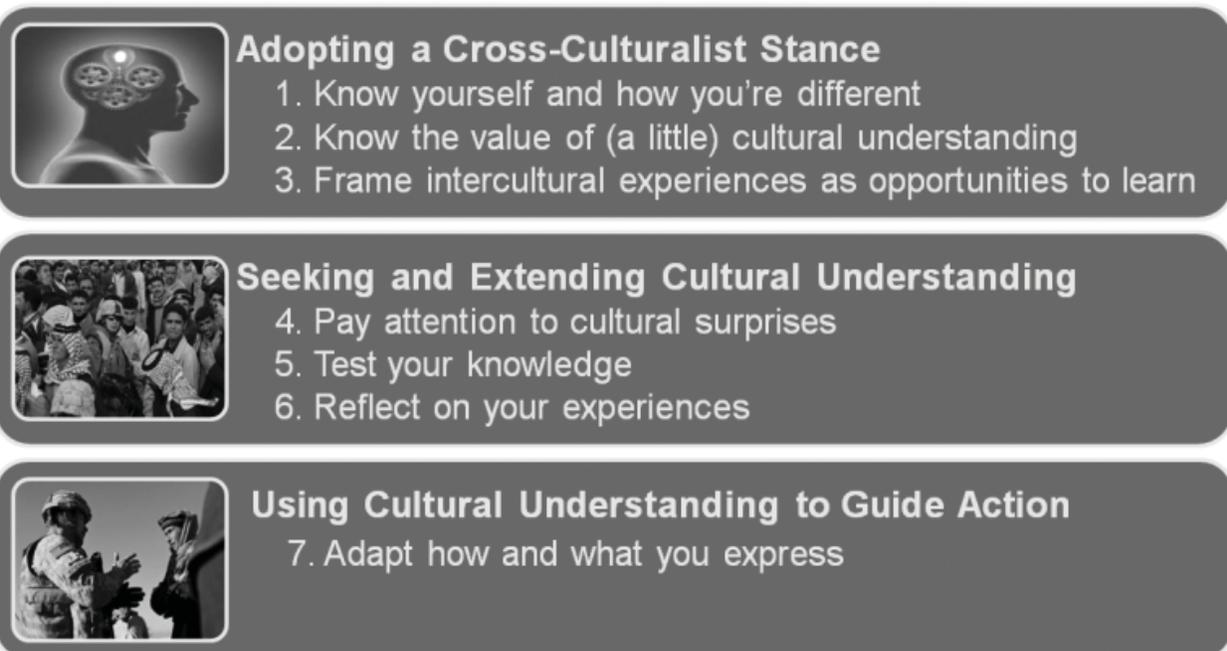


Figure 1  
The seven habits of highly effective warrior-diplomats.

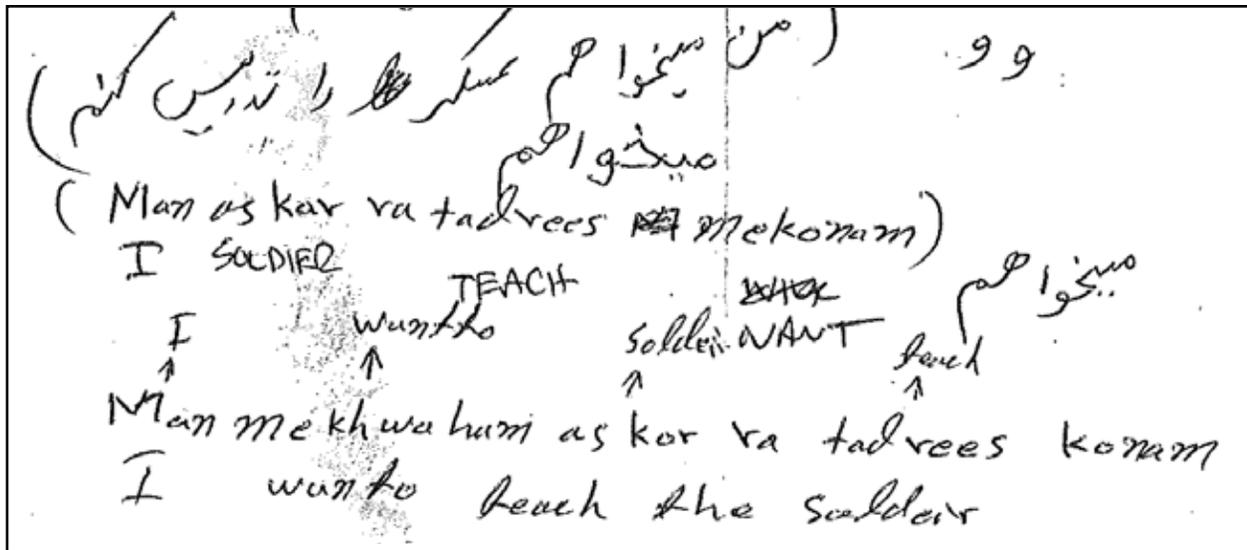


Figure 2

Excerpt from an Air Force major's library of English-to-Dari translated words and phrases that he produced in collaboration with his Afghan National Army soldiers.

as a reference. You walk through the villages and they're all out there planting or growing stuff so I figured that would be the one way to communicate. Based on that, I estimated it to be about two years before.

Cross-cultural experts understand that their personal and cultural background influences their view of the world. A Marine Corps lieutenant colonel described how this supports an innate motivation for learning:

I temper myself with a dose of humility by reminding myself that, "Hey, you don't always see things right or know things." If I do that, I may put myself on a false precipice, or pedestal, from which I could fall. So, what I say with that is, even though I've been to Japan a few times, I say . . . "What more can I learn?"

**...learning some things about a culture "peels away the unknown." It reduces the uncertainty inherent in interacting with people who are very different ...**

Some researchers believe that certain kinds of cultural knowledge are more important than others in promoting further learning. The cross-cultural experts we have studied use their own personal interests as the starting point for learning about new cultures. Their self-defined learning objectives can come from long-term interests or from the need to improve or adapt action. Some of the experts we interviewed had a life-long curiosity about human social, cultural, and psychological dynamics. However, this was not always the case. Many had deep, intrinsic interests in history; some were interested in religion, others in sports, and still others in weapons. All used these areas of interest as a basis for formulating questions about a new region or culture. They sought answers through research before deploying, or through conversation with locals once on the ground. For example, one expert we interviewed was particularly interested in knives, and would take every opportunity to discuss knife-making practices with local Afghans. In this way, he used his intrinsic interest to establish a personal connection to the culture.

**2. Know the value of a little cultural understanding.** Experts operating in different cultural environments understand why meeting mission objectives requires learning about the local culture. All the cross-cultural experts we

interviewed had independently developed clear rationales for the value of cultural understanding. These rationales motivated learning each time they entered a new culture. One Marine Corps colonel noted that learning some things about a culture “peels away the unknown.” It reduces the uncertainty inherent in interacting with people who are very different and thereby increases confidence.

It may not be that you need to read 15 books to know certain facts; it’s just that the act of reading builds your confidence. I mean if you practice for a sport . . . if you go, if I put you right now in front of a stadium of 10,000 people and say do this sport, are you going to be nervous? Or, if I give you a chance to practice for a year to where you get really good at it, and then put you there, are you going to be more comfortable? That’s what your training is doing.

Almost without exception, every expert we interviewed told us he used cultural knowledge as a foundation for building relationships with natives by demonstrating interest.

As one Army captain put it, “when you show that you know something about their culture . . . to them it’s kind of like a check, it’s like, oh okay, you know a little bit, hey? And it’s like, I’m not very good with languages so it does help break the barrier in a way I can’t do through language.”

Some experts go as far as noting that full language proficiency is not a requirement for successful interaction. It can be sufficient to learn a few key words and phrases to help facilitate social interactions.

So I supplemented the pointy-talkie-cards with about a sheet of paper or two . . . with a bunch of Iraqi phrases that were more like social lubrication than anything else. Like sayings like, “see you again tomorrow,” or there was one which, essentially translated to, “this is frustrating and useless,” which turned out to be “yapsi tibir,” it’s “rice over beans,” or “beans over rice,” just let it get done.

In this way, the experts in our sample themselves identified the words and phrases *they wanted to learn in order to achieve specific goals which were important to them.*

Most frequently, their goal was to build relationships. However, their primary motivations for building relationships were to *stay safe* and to *accomplish the mission*. Some experts provided specific examples of ways in which cultural knowledge can be employed to assess risk.

When you’re first meeting your interpreters, you have to figure out where they’re coming from, what they believe. My feeling is I don’t want to get blown up . . . so what is it going to take and can I trust him? Is he a suicide bomber? I have to figure these things out. And, you can’t just ask that question, “are you Taliban?” You have to weasel your way into it somehow, and maybe throw some hints out there . . . I know some nuggets of information that I think would kind of call your bluff-type of information. Like “what do you think of Massoud?” I’ll just throw it out there and see what happens. Then I look for indicators, looking for any reason to doubt, and I guess that is the bottom line . . . So the more I know, the more I can roll in certain situations and test the water.

General Zinni noted, “*The amount of risk isn’t as great as it might appear when you have an understanding of who you’re with and what you’re doing.*” Once the risk is lower, it is easier to create learning and relationship-building opportunities, such as hanging out with interpreters during down time and talking to them about their language and culture.

**3. Frame intercultural interactions as opportunities to learn.** Cross-cultural experts expect to continue to learn new things about a culture the whole time they are in it. As one Marine Corps colonel told us, they tend to regard the knowledge and skills they acquired in training as a springboard for continuing learning.

I think that all that operational culture that you’re given and all those briefs and stuff, it’s good just to kind of put you on your guard that when you go downrange it’s going to be different. Don’t think of it as an absolute and this is the way it’s going to be. But these are some of the typical things that we’ve experienced. When you get there be open to the fact that there

are going to be differences and to try to educate yourself as quickly as you can when you're in that environment to those differences.

A famous research study reviewed the way experts learn from experience in a wide variety of domains and concluded that in order to effectively use experiences as opportunities for practice, one must explicitly frame the experience as an opportunity to learn.<sup>5</sup> The cross-cultural experts we interviewed indeed sought out experiences and relationships that they could learn from.

Numerous warfighters described to us how they deliberately establish relationships with “cultural insiders” to support learning. Cultural insiders are members of the culture and can provide a wealth of information. Most used their interpreters as cultural mentors in order to vet and improve their knowledge of a region’s history, culture, and language. At times, they even sought feedback from interpreters on how they performed in specific interactions, after the fact. However, many

were also creative in taking advantage of ad hoc mentoring relationships. An Army captain said:

To speak to a 70-year old Afghan is incredible. You do not get to be 70 years old in Afghanistan by being dumb. There was this guy who we kept running into and he sounded really intriguing. He didn't want to talk to us. But I guess I finally sort of wore him down out of curiosity on both parts. We just sort of ended up sitting on the side of the street, propped up against the building, having some tea, and talking to each other. I pointed to his beard and I asked him, “You're a very wise man, how did you get to be so old and wise?” and he sort of looked at me like, “Wow, you're asking me that question?” I could just see this whole, sort of cog screeching, “Wow! No one has ever asked me that question.” So, that's when we sat down. He says, “Well, let's sit down, and let's talk about that.”

Just as demonstrating basic knowledge about a culture can serve to build bridges—the very act of showing interest in learning about it can too. Several



(photo courtesy of author)

**CPT Ryan Casper, U.S Army Reserve, 477th Medical Company, passes out school supplies in Scania, Iraq, 2005. Casper organized major humanitarian outreach missions during deployments to Iraq in 2004-2005 and Afghanistan in 2008-2009.**

experts cite both wanting to learn more and wanting to strengthen local relationships as a dual motivation for identifying and interacting with cultural mentors.

A month into my tour I had my [Afghan National Army] soldiers teach me the letters of the alphabet. In five minutes there was a crowd of 12 people around us. I could tell that it did something to them that someone cared enough to learn their language. It was important to them that I respected their culture and language. After that I was really able to start a dialogue with a lot of the soldiers. With a few in particular, our relationship changed from that point on.

Ample research demonstrates that seeking this type of feedback is essential for developing expertise.<sup>6</sup> However, mentors at times provide biased perspectives. Several of the experts we have interviewed talked about how they often checked up on the information provided to them by native mentors by seeking a second opinion:

There could be a slant there or a hidden agenda there that I don't know of. So take it with a grain of salt. He says something, then I go back and get online and say, "All right, let's see what this is," and verify and check.

Seeking a second opinion on specific issues, either from another informant or online, also helps assess the overall credibility of the first informant.

## Seeking and Extending Cultural Understanding

**4. Pay attention to surprises.** Cross-cultural experts are alert to discrepancies and puzzling behavior and inquire into their causes. The surprise caused by encountering unexpected situations motivates them to make sense of the situation, sometimes by trying to consider the world from the point of view of people raised in the other culture. An Army major described being in charge of a U.S.-Afghan team conducting a poppy clearing operation. His team had started building a road so the local farmers could get their goods to market more easily and were working with a local mullah who helped them connect with the locals. He added:

At the end of the operation, we were packing everything up . . . It was me and four or five trucks with the Afghans. My

interpreter came up and said, "Hey sir, there's a lot of [humanitarian assistance] stuff left over." I said, "Really? They said they distributed it all." And he said, "They kept some; they're hiding it in that truck." The Afghan leader there at that time was the mullah. I went to him and said, "I understand we have lots of supplies left over." He said, "No, we don't have any more supplies—they're all distributed." I knew he was lying. If this had happened in the U.S., if he had been a member of my unit, I'd have pulled a weapon on him, said you're guilty, read him his rights and put him into custody.<sup>7</sup>

The Army major was surprised to find out that the mullah, whom he had found to be helpful and agreeable, would not only take things that didn't belong to him, but also lie about it. However, he forced himself to assess the situation from the mullah's point of view:

He wasn't a U.S. officer, he was an Afghan. From our perspective, he was stealing supplies. But in his book, he was supporting his troops. He was taking what was deserved for doing his work. You can't take a black and white perspective that it's right or wrong. My way of handling it was not to be accusatory. I wanted to point it out and let him know that we knew, but I wasn't going to stick my finger in his face. In the States, it'd be a different matter. If I created a situation here where I was the bad guy, embarrassed the mullah, it would've been bad. Instead, I recognized that he was trying to do the right thing by his troops.

We found that cross-cultural experts consistently adopt the perspective of culturally different "others" as a strategy for developing a deeper understanding within situations they initially experience as surprising or confusing. Research suggests that "perspective-taking" is indeed an effective strategy within social and intercultural situations and that individuals who frequently tend to take others' viewpoints are able to describe their own positions in a manner more easily understood by others.<sup>8</sup> Perspective-taking also increases the ability to discover hidden agreements and reach desired outcomes in negotiations.<sup>9</sup>

**5. Test your knowledge.** Cross-cultural experts do not have a firm expectation that everything they know (and everything they have been told) is true. They continually question their understanding and have well-developed strategies for finding out when and how they are wrong.

Adopting a scientific mindset, including formulating and testing hypotheses, is associated with cross-cultural competence. For example, one study found that the types of questions cross-cultural experts ask in order to make sense of cultural surprises are similar to the kinds of questions scientists ask in order to test their hypotheses.<sup>10</sup>

Trying out different strategies and directly seeking feedback are two ways of testing cultural hypotheses. A Marine Corps lieutenant colonel provided us with a good example of how he used both strategies in Iraq to test a hypothesis about a cultural rule he learned in training:

I remember going through training; they'd tell us, "If they see the bottom of your feet, that's automatically an offense." I thought, "Well okay, that's pretty extreme." So, I asked my interpreter, "I always was told if you show the bottom of your feet it's an egregious sin." He goes, "It depends, if your legs are tight and all that. They know that you don't mean to be disrespectful, but just don't automatically show the bottom of your feet, if you're sitting down cross-legged." So, I would make an effort out of it when I sat cross-legged, I would apologize, and the people would say, "No, we know, you Americans . . . we don't take this as an offense." So, *I inquired and I tested it out* and sure enough, no big problem."

A second Marine Corps lieutenant colonel's experience in Somalia provides a great example of using cultural mentors to test a hypothesis. In this case, the lieutenant colonel was surprised to see men with red hair and beards in local crowds, in a country where the population generally has black or brown hair. He developed a hypothesis and vetted it with his interpreter:

In Somalia, if you see a man in the crowd with a red beard, and it is usually just a small little goatee-type of beard, or his hair dyed red as well, then that tells you he is the leader or the tribal elder. I actually learned it when

I got into country. And the way I learned about it is there would be a crowd, and people would be talking to me, but instead of answering me, they would look towards the man with the red beard. So I just kind of put two-and-two together to figure out, "This is the guy in charge because everybody keeps looking to him for answers." I confirmed it with my interpreter. I said, "Why is his beard red? I mean obviously there are no redheads over here. Is this man a leader?"

**6. Reflect on your experiences.** Cross-cultural experts continue to learn from experiences after they happen. During an intercultural interaction, there is little time to reflect on what one is seeing, hearing, and thinking, but afterwards, one can think back over the experience and perhaps uncover signals not noticed at the time or assessments and assumptions made that turned out to be incorrect. It is even possible to identify missed opportunities.

The power of reflection as a learning strategy is evident in the following account of the first meeting between a Marine Corps lieutenant colonel and an Afghan battalion commander in charge of mentoring. Present for the meeting were all the Afghan commander's officers, about a dozen or so. The Marine colonel went around the room introducing himself. Suddenly, one of the Afghans stood up, pointed at the colonel, and said (in front of all the other Afghan officers), "*This man is a jerk.*"

The Marine remembered—

Now, I'm leaving a family behind. I'm deployed, and part of me is thinking, "I don't need to take this crap." I wanted to say, "Hey buckaroo, I'm here to help you guys, you're not doing anything for me

***...the types of questions cross-cultural experts ask in order to make sense of cultural surprises are similar to the kinds of questions scientists ask in order to test their hypotheses.***



(photo courtesy of author)

Marines from the 26 Marine Expeditionary Unit work with the local military in the Horn of Africa to gain support of the population, June 2003. (R-L) Corporal Jamie Bass, Major Leonard J. DeFrancisci, Djibutian officer, Sergeant Michael Swift, and two members of the Djibutian military.

here.” But I bit my tongue and swallowed it. *I didn’t know where he was going at the time . . .* But, I understood that to be effective I could never show that I had lost my temper. So I said, “Clearly, you are a wise man, for my wife, too, thinks I’m a jerk.” And a cacophony of laughter broke out. . . . The Afghan officer became my biggest advocate through the whole deployment. *Later on, I was able to deduce* that he was trying to demonstrate in front of his peers that he was a man of importance and was using me as a way to demonstrate that by calling me a jerk.

In a later interaction with the Afghan officer, the lieutenant colonel aired his hypothesis about the officer’s intent, demonstrating to the Afghan officer that he had thought about the exchange and allowing the Marine to set the stage for the development of a deeper relationship.

The strategy of reflecting on experience as a way to develop expertise is well documented. Chess masters, for example, do not spend all their time playing against each other. In fact, they spend most of their time studying past positions and games.<sup>11</sup> Reflection can either occur internally or as part of

a dialogue with a colleague or, even better, with a mentor. Reflection in the form of dialogue is an especially effective learning strategy because the process of formulating thoughts in order to express them to others is in and of itself a very useful learning activity that leads to meta-cognitive development.<sup>12</sup>

## Applying Cultural Understanding to Guide Action

**7. Adapt what you express and how you express it.** Cross-cultural experts use their cultural knowledge and understanding to determine what they want to achieve and how to express themselves to accomplish it. Cross-cultural experts set communication objectives by visualizing how they want the other person to see them. Then they engage in disciplined self-presentation to meet those ends. For example, the Marine lieutenant colonel who the Afghan called a jerk thought carefully about how he wanted his response to be perceived:

I understood that for me to be effective I could never show that I had lost my temper. I had to consistently remain calm, cool, and collected under any circumstance. If the Afghans saw me come unglued, they

would probably say, “He can’t control his emotions.” And I had learned in training that a Pashtun man always keeps his emotions under check. So if I could not control my emotions there, how could they trust me in a firefight? So I tried to demonstrate that not only could I remain cool, but I could turn this around and show that I can influence others and be in control. What I wanted to do was be humorous without being crazy-looking.

Considering the context means considering *all* the messages communicated: through words, body language, posture, dress, social context, and actions (e.g., showing up early or late, showing up alone or with a security detail). It also involves anticipating that one might not achieve all one’s objectives in a single conversation. As General Zinni observed in the quotation at the beginning of this paper, “*Cultural understanding helps you discover what your objectives should be.*” In our interview, he went further to describe the key to developing such understanding:

We [Americans] come intent to convey a message. It’s in our nature, and it’s our cultural thing that we don’t listen. We come

with the message precooked. You know, it’s the way we do business. And so, they shut down. I mean that can be disrespectful. You know, I really shouldn’t form a message until I listen.

The notion that one should “seek first to understand, then to be understood” (formulated by Covey in his original *7 Habits*) is a valuable recommendation for human interaction in any cultural context. Covey himself described the universal usefulness of the strategy: “Unless people trust you and believe that you understand them, they will be too angry, defensive, guilty, or afraid to be influenced.”

### How Can Military Leaders Foster Cross-Cultural Expertise?

The above are seven mental strategies that highly experienced warrior-diplomats use to develop and practice cross-cultural expertise. Our research suggests that these mental strategies have implications for effective mission performance and mission readiness: preparing for deployments overseas, gaining traction within a new culture or environment, and learning from experiences (Figure 3).

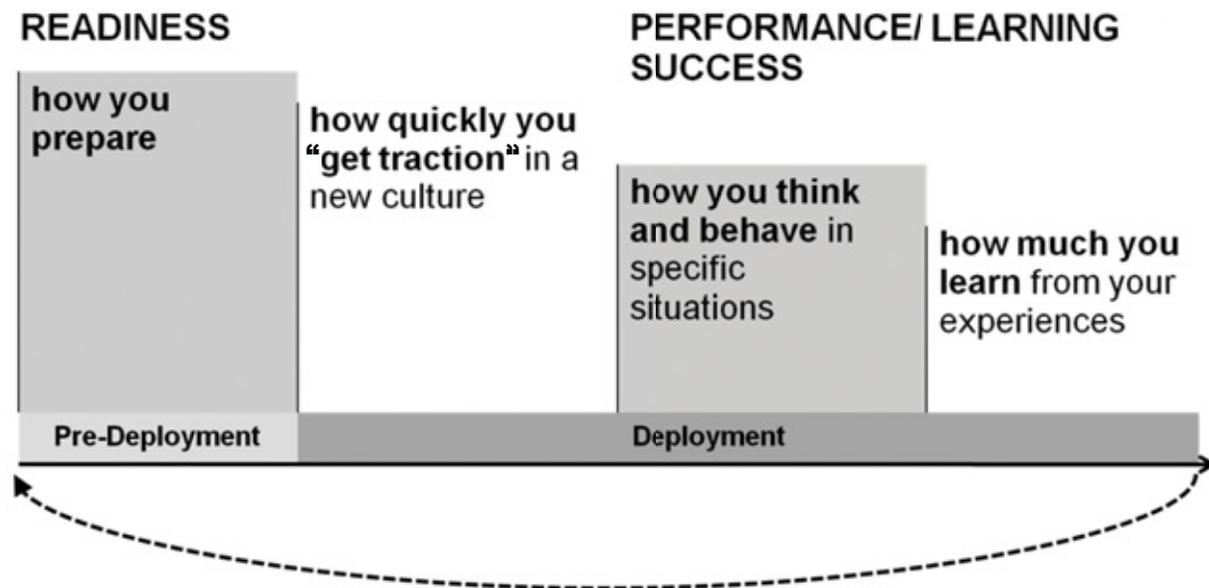


Figure 3

Cross-cultural expertise has implications for mission-related performance, mission readiness, and ongoing learning.

Mental strategies for 3C are often discussed as the results of a great deal of experience, and clearly experience helps.<sup>13</sup> However, it is possible to foster effective mental habits early in one's career path, setting the stage for ongoing cultural learning beginning with the first overseas assignment.

Many leaders likely already engage in some of the practices described in this article. We hope that presenting an inclusive set of strategies will help leaders advance their own cross-cultural competence and perhaps enhance ongoing training and development of junior staff.<sup>14</sup> One way for leaders to enhance cultural skills and knowledge is to deliberately foster dialogue with and between subordinates around cultural issues. Many of the experts we interviewed participate in ongoing discussions about culture and intercultural experiences online in the military blogosphere or on Facebook.

To open discussion, leaders can share this article with subordinates. Further, to begin fostering development of the seven habits, one might organize a discussion of cultural issues or experiences around the following activities:

- Get members of the group to report on cultural surprises.
- Discuss them as a group.
- Try to take the native's perspective.
- Formulate some hypotheses.
- Locate cultural mentors and ask them questions.
- Compare their answers.

Such discussions can help seasoned practitioners set or define a positive vision. By describing and providing examples of possible outcomes produced by handling intercultural interactions wisely, leaders encourage acquiring important cultural knowledge and skills before, during, and after deployment. **MR**

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