

NEWS FROM THE Front

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The Engagement is



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The Engagement is the Mission

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Executive Summary

Soldiers that will serve as combat advisors have to recognize that the engagement is the mission and choose to make that paradigm shift. Five areas for combat advisors to focus their energy during and frame their understanding of combat advising are clearly understanding the objectives, war-gaming, interpreter preparation, understanding what the questions of the key leader mean, and understanding the importance of the recorder. The application of these baseline combat advising concepts will result in combat advising success.

Key leader engagements and combat advising have been an integral component of combat operations since the French and Indian War, especially during periods of draw down. This fact has held especially true during the war on terror in both Afghanistan and Iraq.

The transition period between kinetic combat operations to combat advising can present unique challenges for Soldiers. It really is a comprehensive paradigm shift and requires tremendous intellectual and emotional adaptability to make the transition and be a successful combat advisor. A significant part of the paradigm shift is recognizing that **the engagement is the mission**.

Especially with combat arms Soldiers, the tendency is to play to one's strengths, which is "to close with the enemy by means of fire and maneuver to destroy, capture, or repel an assault by fire, close combat, and counterattack" (ATP 3-21.8 Chapter 1). Ironically however, the same planning principles used to conduct combat operations absolutely apply to, and should be employed for, key leader engagements.

One of the challenges that combat advisors have in conducting effective engagements is understanding where, alternatively, to concentrate energy to be successful. The purpose of this article is to help with that paradigm shift and give specific areas the combat advisor can focus on when planning individual engagements and setting long term advisor goals.

Clearly Understand the Objectives

Understanding that the engagement is the mission results in being able to define subordinate engagement objectives. Any seasoned combat advisor knows from experience that, for example, the primary objective of any initial key leader engagement is to establish a date and time for a second engagement. By starting with the end in mind, a combat advisor can begin to develop subsequent objectives for the duration of time he or she has with the key leader, whether it be days, weeks, or months.

Certain objectives are difficult to quantify, but, nonetheless, have to be established. For example, developing rapport and building trust are both pillars of long term combat advising success. Rapport and trust building may result in conducting engagements in which higher level objectives aren't discussed. In fact, successful rapport building could involve dedicating an entire engagement to a routine weapon qualification range. A common rapport building technique is sharing a meal, both at the key leader's and the combat advisor's base of operation.

It is important to understand that rapport building will be an ongoing line of effort. Constant and consistent efforts to build upon established rapport will transcend your advisor mission and can consume a large percent of each individual engagement. Rapport and trust building may seem a counter intuitive prioritized effort, but they are the bedrock components of the combat advisor's influence over the key leader's actions.

Combat advising has, inherently, the goal of moving the host nation to self-sufficiency in both internal and foreign defense. So naturally, the combat advisor's lines of effort will reflect a greater increase in leading and independence from the advised force from that of the advise and assist force.

War-Gaming

As with the military decision making process (MDMP), an elaborate war game can reveal aspects of the operation, such as decision making points, that would not otherwise be discovered. One technique to war-gaming an engagement is to role play. Deliberately having a member of the advisor team play the role of the key leader benefits the entire team. For the key leader role player, adopting the mentality of the key leader allows that role player to think and feel what that key leader may be thinking and feeling. The role player will also be able to provide the combat advisor insights into how the questions he or she is asking (type, rhythm, and tone) come across.

In addition to role playing the actual conversation, it is also important for the advisor team to discuss and rehearse the following:

- How the team intends to enter the room
- Who will be sitting where during the engagement
- For initial engagements, how to explain any behaviors that might be perceived as unusual or offensive
- Ensuring there is a shared understanding of engagement objectives
- Ensuring that, if the advisor team breaks to engage multiple key leaders, engagement objectives are nested vertically and horizontally

Another tool is scripting or outlining the engagement in written format. The situation the advisor team is trying to avoid is getting into a pattern of engagement in which conditions are not being set, and the team is reacting to the engagement instead of proactively anticipating the scenario. The objective of preparation is for the entire advisor team to have participated in preparing the projected script for the engagement and to have rehearsed its execution.

Interpreter Preparation

Interpreters and interpreter preparation can represent the decisive point of an engagement. Unfortunately, all too often, interpreter incorporation is an afterthought. Combat advisors will have often developed an excellent plan, with clear desired outcomes, and have even rehearsed it, but they will have not involved their interpreter until just prior to engagement execution.

In an ideal setting, the interpreter will be fully integrated into the planning and engagement rehearsal process. The benefits of interpreter integration are:

- It gives the interpreter an opportunity to become familiar with any new terminology
- It gives the interpreter an opportunity to provide critical feedback about the plan from his or her cultural insight(s)
- By understanding the desired outcomes of an engagement beforehand, the interpreter can adjust more easily to any changes of direction during the engagement
- It allows the interpreter to be more dynamic in his or her ability to translate the combat advisor's communication in such a way to maximize the key leader's responsiveness

In settings in which interpreters cannot be fully integrated into the planning and rehearsal process, an alternative is to prepare a synopsis of the plan in written format for the interpreter to review. The ideal situation is to have given the interpreter the opportunity to translate the written synopsis into the target language.

Understanding What the Questions Mean

Key leader questions can often seem spontaneous, out of sequence, and/or irrelevant. For the new combat advisor, such questions can become frustrating because they detract from predetermined information requirements. However, such questions become incredible opportunities to gain insight into the key leader's situation and mind set. In fact, the combat advisor that employs emphatic listening understands that questions that seem off rhythm can communicate volumes of insightful information.

The concept of interpreting the pattern of questions your key leader asks is not complicated. However, it becomes challenging when the focus is on, for example, preparing for a mission or answering priority intelligence requirements (PIRs). A combat advisor's preparation for engagements is critical and should be intense, but the trick is to completely prepare for an engagement and still have the adaptability to take advantage of targets of opportunity.

The Recorder

Because the engagement is the decisive operation, the information gathered is essential for situational reports to a higher headquarters and preparation for follow on engagements.

It is a good tactic, technique, and procedure (TTP) to designate two recorders. One reason for this is, over time, key leaders can pick up patterns in terms of what is important to your advisor team by what is being recorded. If two recorders are actively taking notes, it becomes much more difficult for a negative perception to occur.

The recorder can also capture the mood of the engagement. He or she could also record the sequence of events by noting the time during multiple points of the engagement. Because the recorder(s) are the only one(s) actively taking notes, he or she must remain keenly aware of a multitude of aspects of each engagement, to include any changes to the physical environment, disposition of the key leader relative to previous engagements, and any new participants. It is not uncommon for the primary advisor to become fixated on the discussion, which is why the recorder is and must remain an active sensor, so the primary combat advisor can gain a deeper understanding of the engagement during the after action review (AAR).

Conclusion

Combat advising is an essentially part of accomplishing a strategic mission. These five areas of focus are a baseline for successful combat advising. Committing the same effort to engagement preparation as to planning and preparing for combat operations will yield significant and quantifiable results for the combat advisor team.